JIMMY BLACKMON

RANGER SCHOOL

Discipline, Direction, Determination

Advance Praise for
Ranger School

“Raw, funny, at times painfully descriptive, but always inspiring, Jimmy Blackmon’s book *Ranger School* will make every American proud of the warriors that wear the Ranger Tab.”

—ADMIRAL WILLIAM H. McRAVEN, Admiral, USN

“One of the identifying qualities of a good leader is the ability to lead a ‘felt’ life. In his new book *Ranger School*, Jimmy Blackmon takes us inside the Army’s most arduous and difficult small unit tactics and leadership school, a course which only a few dare to attempt, and lets us feel it. A well-written story of overcoming adversity. Many life lessons in these pages.”

—GENERAL MARTIN E. DEMPSEY (Retired), 18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Also by Jimmy Blackmon

Pale Horse: Hunting Terrorists and Commanding Heroes with the 101st Airborne Division

Cowboys Over Iraq: Leadership from the Saddle

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DISCIPLINE, DIRECTION, DETERMINATION

JIMMY BLACKMON

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Discipline, Direction, Determination
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Contents

Foreword
Preface

Winding Stair Gap
December 19, 1992

RANGER ASSESSMENT PHASE
4th Ranger Training Battalion
Fort Benning, Georgia

Camp Rogers
November 2, 1992

Camp Darby
November 8, 1992

DESERT PHASE
7th Ranger Training Battalion
McGregor Base Camp, New Mexico

McGregor Base Camp
November 1992

Super Supper & Airborne Ops
November 1992

MOUNTAIN PHASE
5th Ranger Training Battalion
Camp Frank D. Merrill, Georgia

Lower Mountaineering
December 1992

Yonah Mountain
December 9, 1992

The Tennessee Valley Divide
December 11–20, 1992

Three Forks

December 1992

The Long Walk Out
December 1992

Christmas Break
December 1992

SWAMP PHASE
6th Ranger Training Battalion
Camp Rudder, Florida

Reptiles and Zodiacs
January 1993

Graduation
January 22, 1993. Fort Benning, Georgia

Acknowledgments

Foreword

You hold in your hands the single most important book to read in order to understand military leadership, the US Armed Forces' most elite warriors, and their role in the decades-long wars after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The first thing to understand is that Ranger School is a *leadership school*. Not all Rangers go from the school to the 75th Ranger Regiment. Many of them (like Jimmy Blackmon) go to other units. But *all* of them bear the "Ranger Tab" on their uniform, and that patch is a universal symbol of leadership excellence.

Ranger School: Discipline, Direction, Determination delves into the fearsome forge that takes mere mortals of flesh and blood and hammers them into the "quiet professionals" who wear the Ranger Tab. Along with Jimmy Blackmon's excellent books, Cowboys *Over Iraq* and *Pale Horse*, this book is the first volume in an amazing trilogy—a triad of masterful storytelling that illuminates and informs the reader about military leadership, the Global War on Terror, and the remarkable career of one of the most extraordinary front-line combat leaders in US military history.

In the 1980s, I had the honor to work with Jerry Ledzinski, who had been a Special Forces A-Team leader during the Vietnam War. For many years during that long and brutal war, US Special Forces (a.k.a. "Green Berets") operated behind enemy lines in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam. Serving as a captain in command of one of these A-Teams has been recognized as the single most dangerous job in that war. Only one man had survived two six-month tours of duty in this position. And then one man survived six tours. That man was Jerry Ledzsinski.

I asked Jerry, "How did you survive six tours in this position?" I expected him to say something about his experiences at West Point or his Special Forces training. No. Maybe it was some influence of his family or his upbringing. No.

Maybe it was his previous combat experience as a young lieutenant, leading paratroopers in the 82nd Airborne Division in the Dominican Republic. No.

Jerry said, “It was all Ranger School. The military ‘troop-leading procedures’ model is the most powerful problem-solving process the world has ever seen. Ranger School carved that problem-solving process into our neurons, and it works. It is all that kept me alive, year after year.”

Jerry (who left the army after the Vietnam War) went on to say, “Today I run a multi-million-dollar investment business, and I do it with the tools I was taught to use in Ranger School.”

In the 1990s, I was able to touch base with Jerry Ledzinski again. He told me about a new “Templeton Investment Fund” that was accepting bids in a worldwide competition to select the individual who would manage this multi-million-dollar endeavor. Jerry won the competition by submitting a five-paragraph operations order that, he said, “blew Templeton out of the water!”

That is the secret of Ranger School. The skills that we learn and successfully apply under great stress (as per Ranger School) are carved into our neurons and indelibly woven into our existence. And *that* is Ranger School’s gift that keeps on giving.

The result, represented by the Ranger Tab on a soldier’s uniform, is an unbreakable “never quit” attitude and absolute mastery of that military problem-solving process. It is a form of “leadership magic” that is carved into your soul.

The battlefield is the most unforgiving, deadly, dangerous field of endeavor known to man. The process of military leadership that has evolved across centuries of warfare is the end product of a deadly Darwinian evolution.

That is why US military officers were chosen to lead the vast majority of our corporations in the post-World War II era. Today, former US military officers still represent a disproportionate amount of corporate leadership positions, and officers leaving the US military are heavily recruited for corporate leadership.

And *that* is what Jimmy Blackmon teaches today in his Executive Leadership Series, dynamic and engaging keynote presentations, and training seminars for business leaders worldwide.

I graduated from Ranger School in 1979, and it was the single most powerful military experience in my career. I have authored many books, but I could never

have written this book. Jimmy Blackmon has an amazing memory (while for me, much of Ranger School was a dull blur), and his later books combine to make his literary contributions greater than the sum of the parts.

One of my favorite World War II authors is John Masters. His book *Bugles and a Tiger* gives great insight into a British Gurkha unit and British officer professional development, pre-war. Then his *Road Past Mandalay* followed Masters's experience in a Gurkha unit during World War II. The impact of these two books is greater than the sum of the parts. It is truly a transcendent combination, a war story to the second power, giving a deep and profound insight into a soldier's life and the British military experience in World War II.

And *that* is what Jimmy Blackmon has given us in his books. Read this book —and then read his other books, if you have not already done so. Read, experience, and understand the most brutal, effective, and powerful leadership school known to man.

Well done, Ranger Blackmon!

Rangers Lead the Way!

Dave Grossman

Lt. Colonel, US Army (ret.)

Author of *On Killing, On Combat, On Spiritual Combat*, *On Killing Remotely*, and *Assassination Generation*

Preface

The United States Army's Ranger School is one of the most arduous military schools in the world, if not the hardest. It is open to soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines in the US Armed Forces, as well as select allied military members. The course is high-risk and completely voluntary. Aspiring rangers must first make it through their locally run, rigorous screening courses before they can even be considered for the school itself. In other words, you can fail out of ranger school before you even get there.

Army rangers are charged with handling some of the most complex and challenging problems our nation faces. So, naturally, the training required to become a ranger is rigorous, and only the most mentally and physically strong graduate the course. Rangers are among the nation's most elite soldiers, with a rich history that predates the Revolutionary War.

Famously, Major Robert Rogers, a flawed yet tactically brilliant officer, used his company of rangers to fight in the French and Indian War. Rogers wrote nineteen standing orders and twenty-eight rules of ranging. Still today, Rogers's Standing Orders are printed on the inside cover of the ranger handbook. They are as follows:

1. Don't forget nothing.
2. Have your musket clean as a whistle, hatchet scoured, sixty rounds powder and ball, and be ready to march at a minute's warning.
3. When you're on the march, act the way you would if you was sneaking up on a deer. See the enemy first.
4. Tell the truth about what you see and what you do. There is an army depending on us for correct information. You can lie all you please when you tell other folks about the Rangers, but don't never lie to a Ranger or officer.

5. Don’t never take a chance you don’t have to.
6. When we’re on the march we march single file, far enough apart so one shot can’t go through two men.
7. If we strike swamps, or soft ground, we spread out abreast, so it’s hard to track us.
8. When we march, we keep moving till dark, so as to give the enemy the least possible chance at us.
9. When we camp, half the party stays awake while the other half sleeps.
10. If we take prisoners, we keep ’em separate till we have had time to examine them, so they can’t cook up a story between’ em.
11. Don’t ever march home the same way. Take a different route so you won’t be ambushed.
12. No matter whether we travel in big parties or little ones, each party has to keep a scout twenty yards ahead, twenty yards on each flank, and twenty yards in the rear so the main body can’t be surprised and wiped out.
13. Every night you’ll be told where to meet if surrounded by a superior force.
14. Don’t sit down to eat without posting sentries.
15. Don’t sleep beyond dawn. Dawn’s when the French and Indians attack.
16. Don’t cross a river by a regular ford.
17. If somebody’s trailing you, make a circle, come back onto your own tracks, and ambush the folks that aim to ambush you.
18. Don’t stand up when the enemy’s coming against you. Kneel down, lie down, hide behind a tree.
19. Let the enemy come till he’s almost close enough to touch, then let him have it and jump out and finish him up with your hatchet.

Rogers handpicked his rangers. Back then, they were a rough bunch, including some rabble-rousers and whorehouse owners. Interestingly, Rogers was an innovator. In an age where British regulars stood in lines and fired muskets in a volley, Rogers went completely asymmetric. He was anything but status quo. He attracted men with a high tolerance for risk. From ice skating across rivers in the dead of night to hiding out in enemy territory for weeks on end, Rogers was an inventive leader who could not have conceived the legacy he would leave.

The British, and later American, army saw the value of Rogers’ methods; thus, his rules and tactics have passed the test of time. Eventually, army leadership decided that a formalized process was probably better than recruiting rough and

rowdy characters from the fringes of society. In 1950, during the Korean War, Ranger School was born, and since that time, the course has undergone countless changes to the training regimen. Desert phase, for example, was added to the course in 1983, only to be removed in 1995. The elimination of desert phase was simple economics. Flying ranger students and ranger instructors (RIs) back and forth across the country was cost-prohibitive. The duration of the course has varied from fifty-eight days to sixty-eight days. Even the order of events within individual phases often varies.

Due to the extreme nature of the training, safety is naturally a concern in ranger school. For example, severe weather often forces the Ranger Instructors (RIs) to modify the training in order to avoid hyperthermia in winter or heat stroke in summer.

No two ranger school classes are alike. In fact, no two rangers experience the same course in the same way. That is the brilliance of ranger school. The end result *is* the same—a hardened, wiser leader who uniquely understands what a soldier is mentally and physically capable of and who is prepared to lead in ways he'd never thought possible.

In order to experience the diverse environments in which army rangers operate, the army conducts the course in various locations throughout the United States. My class began the course at Fort Benning, Georgia (Home of the Ranger Training Brigade) on November 2, 1992. We parachuted into desert phase (Camp McGregor, New Mexico) the week before Thanksgiving. We moved on to mountain phase (Camp Frank D. Merrill near Dahlonega, Georgia) the first week of December and finished that phase of training five days prior to Christmas. Upon completion of mountain phase, we were released for Christmas break. Swamp phase, which is conducted at Camp Rudder, Florida, began on January 4 and ended on January 20. Class 2-93 graduated on January 22, 1993. I left a lot of blood, sweat, and tears at each location, but along the way, I learned more about myself than I could have ever imagined.

I would be remiss if I did not note that a soldier who successfully graduates ranger school earns the right to wear the coveted ranger tab throughout their career. They are considered ranger-qualified; however, that does not mean that they will ever serve in the 75th Ranger Regiment, which is the army's only

ranger unit and its premier light infantry fighting force. They specialize in special operations raids, forcible entry operations, and special reconnaissance deep inside enemy territory. Those who do not go on to serve in the ranger regiment are distributed throughout the army to serve in various leadership positions.

Readers will note that all rangers in this book are male. At the time of the events in this book, ranger school was open only to males. The first females to graduate ranger school were Captain Shaye Lynne Haver and Lieutenant Kristen Griest. They went through the course in 2015.

I share these facts up front to ensure that the reader understands that this was my experience to the best of my recollection. In some cases, I recall only a fellow ranger student's first or last name. In those cases, I have changed their names altogether. I have consulted with several fellow rangers, as well as ranger instructors, to try and be as accurate as possible. Nevertheless, at the writing of this book, twenty-seven years have passed since class 2-93 graduated. Inevitably, I've gotten some small detail wrong, and for that, I am sorry. However, in talking with my fellow rangers, I've found that our memories often align to a degree that suggests we remember the harrowing experience of ranger school pretty much the way it was.

In any case, I can promise that the emotions related here are 100 percent accurate. This is how I became a United States Army Ranger, one of the greatest accomplishments of my life.

Winding Stair Gap

December 19, 1992

There was not a doubt in my mind—I was about to die, and they didn't give a shit.

Forty-seven days into US Army Ranger School, and I was well beyond anyone's common understanding of tired. Tired is what you are after a long day of mowing the lawn and weed-eating. The ranger school version of tired is significantly different. I was so exhausted I thought I might fall down on the cold, hard ground, lose consciousness, and die quivering in the fetal position. The Ranger Instructors (RIs) issued 800 mg ibuprofen like candy. In fact, they called it ranger candy, and they seemed to be under the impression that ranger candy would cure whatever ails you, but the agonizing soreness I was experiencing was not muscle-deep. It was bone-deep, and nothing short of a month off was going to knock a dent in it.

The seventy-pound rucksack pulled on my shoulders like a freight train, and both my big toes had gone completely numb days prior. Rainwater ran down the crack of my ass like a river, and there wasn't one square inch of my back that did not ache. Every step I took brought pain to a degree I'd never thought I could endure. I had lost twenty pounds in a month and a half. Hunger was my constant companion, but the gnawing in my stomach now paled in comparison to the pain in my feet and back.

It was after midnight. The temperature hovered in the high thirties, and it was raining like a cow pissing on a flat rock when we arrived at the top of Winding Stair Gap. A thick layer of clouds blotted out the moon, making it impossible to see anything other than shapes in the darkness.

"Alright, rangers, it's time to walk out of here," the RI said. "It's just over ten miles back to camp, so suck it up and let's go."

Several rangers adjusted the shoulder straps on their rucksacks in preparation

for the long walk out. No one spoke aloud, yet each of us carried on an incessant internal conversation—the mind trying to convince the body to keep going.

As fate would have it, my squad was the support squad, which meant we carried the M60 machine guns. I began walking with the twenty-three-pound gun draped around my neck by a sling. Winding Stair Gap Road is a small, rocky forestry road in northern Georgia. It descends at 7 percent grade over approximately five miles. Once at the bottom, we'd turn left onto another forestry road until we hit Hightower Church Road. From there, it's a two-mile walk uphill back to Camp Frank D. Merrill. I knew the area well. I'd grown up in these mountains, but familiarity wasn't going to help me today.

Employing Rogers's rules, we strung out along the road in two files. One ranger walked on the left side of the road, and the next ranger walked on the right. We weaved our way down the rocky road, trying to avoid deep ruts that were now flowing like tiny streams. My leather boots squished with water as I walked, and rain dripped from the brim of my cap to the back of my hand, which held the machine gun tightly to try and relieve the weight on my neck.

Our weapons had to be oriented with the barrel out. Rangers on the right side of the road pointed their barrels to the right, and those on the left pointed theirs to the left. I'm right-handed, so it was awkward to handle the M60 primarily with my left hand. I put my head down, stared at the ground, and walked, but after a mile and a half or so, the pain in my neck, back, and left arm was excruciating. I had to get relief, but the RIs were not stopping.

"We've gotta switch," I whispered to a fellow ranger. "I need a break."

"Okay," he said, and we quickly took a knee in the center of the road.

He was carrying the sixteen-pound machine gun tripod. While I took the M60 off my neck, he loosened the straps on his rucksack and removed the tripod. I then quickly strapped the tripod to the top of my ruck, and he shouldered the gun. My ruck now weighed well over eighty pounds, but switching to the tripod gave my neck temporary relief. Under such extreme duress, simply shifting the weight to another set of muscles made a profound difference.

As I continued walking down the mountain, my feet began to burn. At first, it was only in my forefoot. Then my heels began to burn as well. It had rained for three days straight, so I knew my feet were pruned. Now, with each step I took,

my feet slid forward in my boots, causing me to wince in pain. The leather had stretched due to the moisture, so there was more room for my feet to slide. I tried not to think about it. *Just keep walking. All you have to do is make it back to camp, and mountain phase is over*, I kept telling myself.

Then I visualized *that* guy. *That guy* was a ranger I knew who had made it through ranger school and earned his tab, but who I thought was weaker than most. The fact that he had earned his tab surprised me. In my mind, I saw his face. *Is that guy stronger than you?* I asked myself. He earned his ranger tab. He faced his demons, and I'm sure he wanted to quit too, but he didn't. So I kept walking.

A couple of miles later, the guys carrying the M60s wanted to swap again. This time, the RIs let us stop momentarily to switch. I took a knee and removed the tripod from my ruck. As I swapped with my ranger buddy, I could hear arguing just down the road. Some of the other rangers didn't want to swap. No one wanted to carry the machine gun. We were all hurting. It made sense to share the load, and in normal circumstances, we would have willingly helped one another, but in those extreme conditions, some rangers could not force themselves to simply do the right thing. We were learning a lot about ourselves and each other.

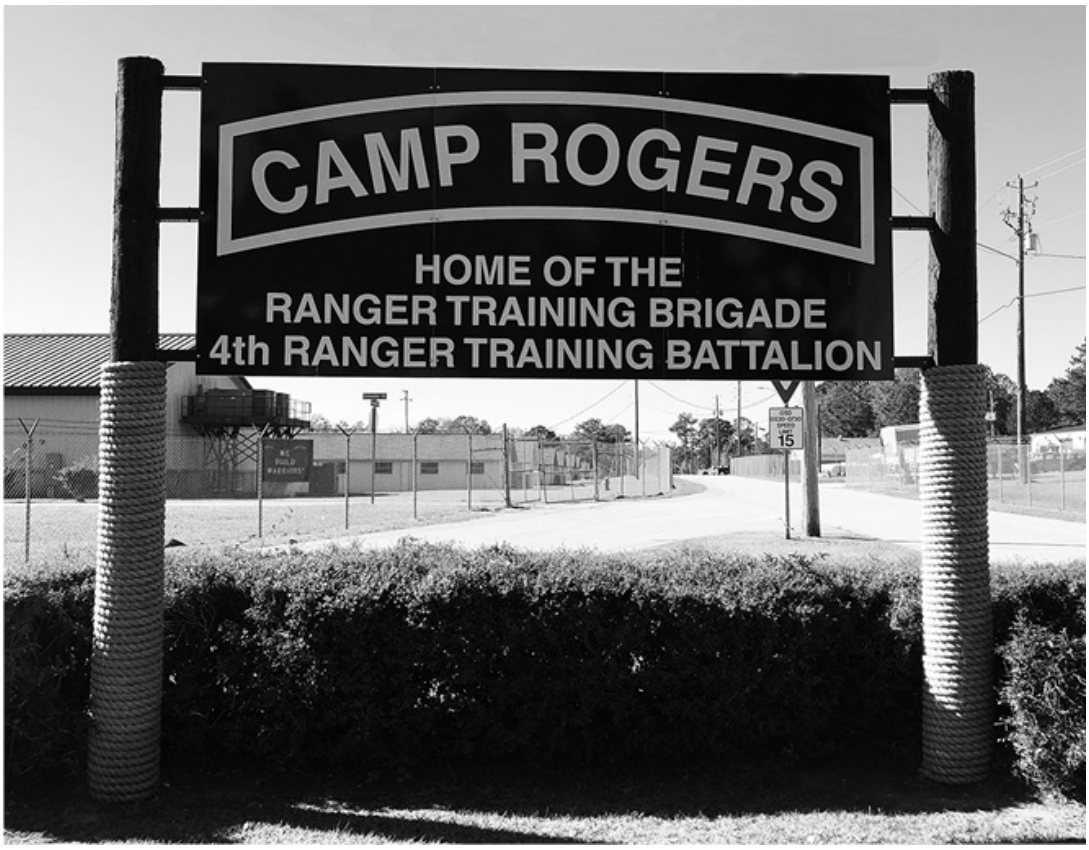
Lightning streaked across the sky like glowing wires, illuminating dark clouds, and thunder echoed through the valleys. I had come a long way, but my feet were now on fire, and for the first time, I wondered if I could physically make it. Since beginning ranger school, each of us had been faced with a binary choice, quit or keep going. Along the way, many men had opted for the former. I had always been able to suck it up and keep "rangering on" until this point. Now, with both of my feet on fire, it wasn't a matter of making a mental choice. I questioned if I could physically continue.

Suddenly, I felt an emotion that instantly brought me to the verge of tears—fear of failure. I had made it this far. All I had to do was walk back to camp in order to complete mountain phase. Then, only swamp phase would remain. This meant everything to me, but now this sudden, unexpected fear had changed things. It scared the hell out of me. I had suffered previously, but I had survived. Quitting was never an option, yet now I could be dropped from ranger school not

because I quit, but because my body had quit on me. And so, for the first time, I was afraid of failure.

I stumbled and almost fell. How could this be happening to me?

Photo by Col. (Ret.) Clint Cox



RANGER ASSESSMENT PHASE

4th Ranger Training Battalion
Fort Benning, Georgia

Camp Rogers

November 2, 1992

I stepped out of Brian Traynor's pickup truck at 0500 hours on a cold, dark November morning. Nervous anticipation hung in the air like static electricity. I hoisted my two duffel bags from the bed of his truck in a thick fog that hung ghost-like in the air above us. Brian walked around the truck to say goodbye. "Good luck, Jimmy," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder.

His sentiment was neither encouraging nor congratulatory. Brian's demeanor was somber and serious, neighboring on sympathetic. I sensed pity in his eyes. That is because he understood precisely the adventure upon which I was embarking. Brian was my college classmate, and he had only recently earned the coveted black-and-gold ranger tab. The experience was still fresh in his mind; the scar tissue had yet to heal. He knew exactly what I was about to experience, and to be honest, I thought I knew how the next few months would go myself.

I was certain that this would be the toughest military training I'd ever participated in. And no doubt I'd be pushed to my mental and physical limits. But I was fit and strong. In fact, I knew that I was among the top 1 percent physically. Also, several friends had told me what to expect and how to prepare. I'd just have to steel myself against the extreme hunger and sleep deprivation. Though there would certainly be a few surprises along the way, I felt confident that I knew how it would go.

I had no idea.

The day prior, I had driven from my apartment in Fort Rucker, Alabama to Fort Benning, Georgia, where I spent the night with Brian in his quarters. That night, he'd draped a trash bag around me and shaved my head bald. We were up and eating breakfast, my final meal, at 0400 hours. Now, here I stood with day zero of ranger school about to begin.

To be honest, it was somewhat surreal. I grew up the son of a mill worker

from North Georgia. All I ever debated in high school was which shift I'd work. The mill was a foregone conclusion. Then an army recruiter knocked on our raggedy screen door and asked, "Son, how'd you like to join the army?"

My father was drafted for the Korean War. He served his service obligation then returned to Calhoun, Georgia and hung that Eisenhower jacket in the closet—Corporal Blackmon. When the recruiter asked me if I wanted to join the army, I saw myself in that uniform—a soldier. That was February 1986. I went to basic training that summer and then advanced individual training. I then used the Montgomery GI Bill to help with college.

I attended North Georgia College, one of the four senior military colleges at that time, where I served as the commander of the Corps of Cadets during my senior year. In 1991, I was commissioned a second lieutenant and subsequently reported to Fort Rucker, Alabama for the aviation officer basic course and flight school. From hourly wage to an officer in the United States Army. It was hard to believe. My career was off to a great start, but the next great challenge—the greatest crucible thus far in my life—lay before me.

I took a deep breath, picked up my two duffel bags, and turned to walk through the gate. I once heard an old man say that if you have to do something hard, don't think on it too long or you'll talk yourself out of doing it. "Son," he said, "if you've gotta swallow a frog, don't stare at him too long." So I didn't hesitate. I walked straight through the gates and never looked back.

A small handwritten sign pointed the way to "In-processing." As I approached the tent, a sergeant intercepted me—the first RI I encountered. Ranger school's Cerberus, guarding the gates to a school that produced the world's most elite fighting men. He was not an overly large man. In fact, he defied the common Hollywood stereotype of a knuckle-dragging, door-kicking, tire-tool swinging, bodybuilding Rambo type. This RI was lean and sinewy—no excess flesh. I could tell that he was more endurance than sheer power, a man that could handle his body weight well. He wore jungle boots, crisply starched BDU pants, and a black sweatshirt with a ranger tab printed across the chest and a white nametag above it—Price.

A ranger tab was also sewn above the rank on his patrol cap, which was ranger-rolled—a manner of shaping a cap that was distinctly ranger. "Put your

gear down over there, ranger," he said, pointing to a spot in the corner of the tent. "Get your tennis shoes on, STUD." He was direct and to the point, leaving no question as to who was in charge.

STUD was short for student, a term RIs commonly used when referring to ranger students. RIs are the keepers of the tab, and gods to a STUD until he graduates, quits, or is removed from the course. Once a ranger student begins the course, there are several ways out. He can receive a lack of motivation (LOM), which is essentially quitting. He could get dropped for a safety violation or get injured (medical drop), which was extremely common. Finally, he could become an academic drop for failing to pass patrols or for having a combination of patrol failures, low peer evaluations, and negative spot reports. The preferred option, the one we all sought, was to graduate and earn the tab. However, the ratio says it all. There are four ways to depart the course tab-less and one way to earn it. Less than 50 percent of those who start the course finish, and of that 50 percent, most rangers will recycle, or repeat, at least one phase of training. Only a handful of very fortunate, and certainly competent, ranger students make it straight through the sixty-eight-day course unscathed.

It was no secret that there is a lot of luck involved in earning the ranger tab. On average, a typical day lasts twenty-plus hours with two and a half to three hours of sleep. Each student gets one meal per day on most days. Sleep and food deprivation significantly increase the likelihood of injury—particularly when one considers the risk associated with what a ranger must do to get through the course. "Don't get hurt!" That's the key.

Each student is also allowed a maximum of twenty-four hours of sick call for the entire course, and it's cumulative. If a ranger has to go to the hospital or winds up with walking pneumonia, he'll easily exceed twenty-four hours and become either a medical drop or medical recycle. In other words, as a reward for getting injured, a ranger either starts over or goes home. Don't get hurt, indeed.

I sat down on my duffle bag and pulled my boots off. After lacing up my tennis shoes, the sergeant pointed to a group of students, "Go wait over there, ranger."

The quietness surprised me. I expected screaming, cussing, and ranting. I expected to see students doing push-ups or laying on their backs with their feet

held six inches off the ground all over the place, but it was eerily quiet. *The calm before the storm*, I presumed.

I saw another RI walk to the in-processing tent. He conversed with the RI that had received us, took a piece of paper from him, and then headed our way.

"You rangers come with me," he said in a stern but professional tone.

He also wore the black sweatshirt with a ranger tab across the chest and a white name tag just above it. Students wore sterile battle dress uniforms (BDUs), which meant the only patches on our uniforms were our name and US Army—no rank, no badges, no unit insignia. Regardless of rank, we were all equal in ranger school: peers.

Normally, I wore "medium-regular" sized pants, which meant medium waist and regular inseam. But in ranger school, I knew we would not blouse the pants over the top of our boots; the pant legs would remain untucked. My normal pant length would almost certainly have to be rolled up to keep from dragging on the ground, so I bought several pairs of "medium-short" BDU trousers at an army-navy surplus store. The pants looked like highwaters hanging just above my ankles, but I never had to worry about them coming unrolled and dragging in the dirt.

We followed the RI down the road to a grassy area. He pointed at one of the rangers and then to a spot on the ground. "Ranger, go ahead and get down for push-ups. You other rangers, do an about-face, and DO NOT look back."

We were standing on a bank just above the ditch that paralleled the road. *We are going to do the physical fitness test right here*, I thought to myself. The ground wasn't even flat. We would essentially be doing push-ups with our feet elevated. That would put more weight on our arms, making the push-ups a lot more difficult.

The physical fitness test to get into Ranger school was infamous. All a candidate had to do was forty-nine push-ups in two minutes, fifty-nine sit-ups in two minutes, six perfect pull-ups, and run two miles in sixteen minutes. The key to passing this test was not just doing one hundred repetitions, which I could do on a standard army physical fitness test. It was to do forty-nine very slow and deliberate, perfectly executed push-ups. If we went fast, we might do one hundred, yet only receive credit for fifty-five. Or, worse yet, we might even fail.

Ranger lore had it that once the class was filled in terms of a predetermined number, everyone else would fail the physical fitness test no matter how good their push-ups and sit-ups were. That's why I had reported at 0500. We were told to report between 0500 and 0700. I wanted to be one of the first in line for the physical fitness test, just in case the rumors were true.

Another twist was that the RI would not count repetitions out loud. He would simply say, "begin." When he was satisfied that a ranger had done forty-nine good enough repetitions, he would merely tell the ranger to get up. This was both frustrating and stressful. It's impossible to adjust if you don't know how you are doing.

I was fourth in the line of six. "Begin, ranger," I heard the RI tell the first ranger student, who then began doing push-ups while the rest of us stood with our backs turned. The only thing I could hear was the sound of the ranger's chest slightly touching the ground as he pumped out push-ups. Then I saw movement in front of me. Ever so slowly, a ranger student two in front of me began to turn his head around in an attempt to take a peek at the ranger doing push-ups. *Don't be stupid*, I thought. *Just do what he said*.

I suppose he assumed that the RI was totally focused on the student doing push-ups. He could not have been more wrong.

"You! You, looking back. Come here, ranger!" the RI said.

The ranger doing push-ups stopped and went to his knees as the RI turned his attention to the student ahead of me. Quickly, the ranger stepped out of line and turned to face the RI. "What's your name, ranger?"

The ranger gave his name. "Johnson, sergeant. Stanley Johnson."

The RI made a note on the clipboard. "I told you not to look back, ranger. You can't follow instructions. You'll get somebody hurt. You're a safety violation. Now, go retrieve your bags."

And just like that, he was thrown out of ranger school.

The ranger stared at the ground as he slowly walked back to the tent where we had grounded our equipment. His ranger school experience had lasted less than an hour. He had not even broken a sweat. All the hard work he'd done to get there, undone now by a simple movement of the neck. The inability to follow instructions. As we would come to see, there was very little margin for error at

ranger school, and quick missteps had instant, and often serious, consequences.

The RI then returned his attention to the ranger that was waiting on his hands and knees. “Okay, let’s continue,” he said, and the ranger student started his push-ups over.

Friends had advised me to be the gray guy. Don’t stand in front, but don’t stand in the back. Stand in the middle. Don’t be first, and don’t be last. Be in the front one-third. Try to not be seen. It all made perfect sense to me.

When it was my turn, I got down on my hands and knees. The dew on the grass was cold and wet. The RI announced, “Ready,” and I assumed the push-up position. “Begin,” and very deliberately, I began pushing.

I counted sixty-four push-ups in my head before the RI told me to get up. Sit-ups went smoothly as well. The RI then took us out to a road where about fifty students were stretching their legs and jogging circles in the road to loosen up. By that time, it was getting light outside. A vast blanket of heavy white fog hung in the air, suffocating what little sound was produced. The stark contrast to my expectations of screaming and yelling made the situation more unnerving. I supposed it was intentional.

“Alright, rangers, this is the two-mile run. Just stay on this road until you see an RI. He’ll be standing in the middle of the road. That’s the one-mile turnaround. Circle him and come back.”

With that, the RI simply yelled, “Go!” and we were off.

I could run two miles in less than ten minutes, but the sage counsel to not stand out persisted in my head, so I settled in at about tenth place and remained there for the entire two miles. For the next twelve minutes, all I heard were tennis shoes pounding pavement and heavy breathing. As we finished, an RI directed us to stand aside and get out of the way. When the allotted sixteen minutes had expired, several RIs stepped into the road and directed those still finishing the run to, “Go to the tent and secure your equipment.”

Ranger school was over for them.

As soon as the last man crossed the finish line, we loaded onto busses that transported us to the Harmony Church swimming pool for the Combat Water Survival Test (CWST). The test was straightforward. There were no hidden agendas. Everyone knew the standard before they reported to ranger school, and

they were supposed to have been tested at their pre-ranger course. We had to swim the length of the fifteen-meter pool, conduct the equipment don and ditch, and finally, finish the three-meter blindfold walk.

Like the physical fitness test, the combat water survival test was a drop event—no retest. If a student failed, he went home. It never occurred to me that a student would show up to ranger school, knowing that they would be thrown into a swimming pool, and *not* know how to swim. Not until I saw it, that is.

As I waited in line, I saw a student hesitate. It was his turn to jump into the pool and swim the fifteen meters. "Let's go, ranger. Git your ass in the pool," an RI with a thick Southern drawl said.

He looked at the water and kind of danced in place. He stepped up to the edge but then retreated a step. I could see the fear in his eyes.

"What the fuck, ranger? Can't you swim?" the RI asked.

The ranger student inched up to the edge once again, and the RI shoved him from behind. The student threw his weapon aside as he entered the pool and instantly began flailing in the water. He bobbed and thrashed, his fear-raged eyes as big as saucers. He absolutely had no idea how to swim—not the faintest.

"You dumbass fucker," the RI said as he watched in amusement.

I wondered if they were going to let him drown. Eventually, an RI casually walked to a fence that surrounded the pool and retrieved a hook on a pole but did not rush to rescue the frantic ranger student. Instead, he watched as the student fought to keep his mouth above the surface, desperate for air. Finally, the RI extended the hook to the ranger, who clung to it like glue until he could grasp the side of the pool.

"Rangers!" the RI shouted. "They any more of you dumb sons a bitches that can't swim?"

Silence.

"Save us the trouble. If you can't swim, just say so now, 'cause I might lose interest and let your dumb ass drown."

There were a couple of others who jumped in, then immediately clung to the side of the pool. No amount of urging from the RIs could convince them to let go, so two RIs grasped them by their BDU blouses and snatched them out of the pool. They all went home, and we never saw them again.

I swam the length of the pool using the sidestroke. We swam with all of our equipment and our boots on, but there was no time requirement, so if a student knew how to swim, it was not overly taxing. I then jumped into the deep end with my load-carrying equipment (LCE) and a rubber M16 rifle—a training device that soldiers affectionately call a rubber duckie. The requirement was to jump into the pool and completely submerge, ditch all of your equipment without any portion of your body breaking the water's surface, then swim to the side of the pool.

The final task was a bit trickier for me. For this task, candidates climbed to the top of the three-meter board—nine feet above the water's surface. We wore all of our equipment and carried the rubber duckie. The RI standing at the top placed a blindfold over our eyes. He centered us on the board and ordered us to walk off the board. Ideally, we would walk straight forward, one foot in front of the other, until we fell off the end of the board. It's a very uncomfortable feeling, knowing the fall is coming but not knowing when.

When my turn came, I remember looking down and seeing the low board to my left. *Whatever you do, don't fall off this thing to the left, or you'll break your neck on the low board*, I thought to myself. I don't have good balance in the dark, never have. Apparently, it's a gene I inherited from my father. For as long as I could remember, he walked like a drunk man crossing an icy road in the dark.

The idea is to walk off and enter the water feet first. And it was in my best interest to ensure that the rubber duckie was well out in front of me when I entered the water. Otherwise, it would snap back and hit me in the face. I'd already seen two students make that mistake. RIs were attending to them presently on the side of the pool as blood spurted profusely from their faces.

Carefully, I began to walk forward. *Six steps and I should be to the end*, I thought to myself. I wished I could just jump off the end of the board. Jumping from this height did not bother me. It was walking a straight line blindfolded that got me. One, two, three, free-falling. On the fourth step, my left foot landed on the side of the board, and off I went—sideways, and of course, I'd fallen off the left side!

By the grace of God, I missed landing on the low board, and I had the

wherewithal to thrust the rubber duckie out in front of me as I entered the water. While still under the water, I could hear the muffled sound of RIs screaming and talking to one another. I knew it was about me. I wished I could stay under forever. I did not want to surface. What were they going to do? Did I fail?

"Ranger, get your ass back up here!" the RI atop the diving board shouted when I finally surfaced.

I hustled back to the top of the board. "I told you to walk off this board," he said. Then he hesitated. "Which technically you did, but walk off the end, dumbass."

Once again, he blindfolded me, centered me on the board, and I began to walk. One, two, three, four, five—free-falling. I missed the board again and entered the water face first. All I heard when I surfaced was the RI at the top. "Dumb fucking ranger," he said, but I had *technically* passed the test.

It took hours to run the several hundred students through the combat water survival test. Once everyone had been tested, we loaded the buses and returned to Camp Rogers. But with each test, our numbers had continued to thin.

When the bus stopped, the RI sitting up front stood and faced the back of the bus. "When you exit this bus, I want you to form three lines, rangers."

He then stepped off the bus, and we followed him. Up until that point, we had just been a horde of ranger students, but I realized that the RIs were about to assign us to companies. There are three companies in ranger school—Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie. Rumors, lore, and legends abound when it comes to ranger school. Every ranger had been told by his buddies who had already gone through which company was the easiest at Fort Benning. I had heard "Easy Alpha, Be No Bravo, and Christmas Charlie." I decided to cast my lot with Alpha Company, so I made sure I was in the first line.

There were six of us who had graduated the officer basic course at Fort Rucker together, so we knew one another. We had been training together for the past two months. Since we were all together, we'd heard the same rumor about Alpha Company being the easiest. We all tried to get in the Alpha Company line, but the lines were uneven, so they made several rangers switch to another line. Ultimately, three of us made it into Alpha Company. We'd soon find out that we chose poorly.

One by one, we printed our name on the list that assigned us to our company. As we did so, we were given a roster number. We would be known by our numbers for the remainder of ranger school—not a name, a number. My roster number—007. *Great,* I thought to myself. *That should get some attention—James Bond.*

After receiving roster numbers, we were directed into a building with tables lining both sides of the room, front to back, wall to wall. I turned the corner to enter the room, and all I saw was a long line of bare asses as students bent over tables. It was the dreaded gamma globulin shot. Gamma globulin is administered to boost a student's immune system. Our bodies were about to be reduced to nothing, and the environment we would be operating in was going to be harsh. We needed all the help we could get to keep from getting sick. The shot is administered to the buttocks, and it feels like a baseball has been inserted into your butt. Needless to say, the soreness that follows is dreadful.

We had not been placed in companies or issued equipment before the physical fitness and combat water survival tests because of the attrition rate. We had already lost a lot of would-be rangers. Ranger Assessment Phase had only become a part of ranger school in the mid-1980s. The cadre recognized that rangers were showing up unable to meet the standards, so it was formally incorporated into the course. The entire first week is designed to quickly get rid of those who do not have the mental or physical toughness to make it through.

There is a large black-and-gold sign at Camp Rogers with a ranger tab in the middle. The sign says, "Not for the Weak or Faint-Hearted." The sign says it all.

As harsh and egotistical as it may sound, not everyone has what it takes to become a ranger. It requires a degree of suffering that the average person is not capable, or willing, to endure. For this reason, it is best to weed out those who cannot or will not make it as early as possible in the process.

Now that the initial attrition wave was over, we were taken to the central issue facility to draw our equipment. This took us well into the evening. Along the way, we were issued a Meal, Ready-to-Eat (MRE), portions of which we consumed on the move. Technically, we were only supposed to eat in the patrol base or when told to do so, but as hunger would increase, so would our tolerance for risk. We'd stuff crackers, dehydrated fruit, and the coveted Tootsie Roll into

our pockets and take a bite when the RIs weren't looking. This would become our routine for the foreseeable future—eat what you can, when you can, and do it while no one is looking.

By the time we returned to the barracks, which was an open-bay building with bunk beds from end to end, we were dog-tired. It had been a very long and stressful day. At around 2200 hours, we were told to, "Get some rack, rangers."

That was it. No one had really abused us at all. Everything that day had been conducted in a professional, businesslike manner. *Is this the way it's going to be*, I wondered?

As students began laying down, I noticed that some rangers stripped down to their skivvies, while others kept their BDUs on. I wondered if they knew something that I did not. Uncertain, I chose to take my boots off but sleep in my uniform.

Within minutes, every man in the company was sound asleep, including me.

It would not last.

I have never in my life been awakened so abruptly, not even years later, in combat, with mortars and rockets raining down all around me. It seemed like twenty RIs entered the building simultaneously. Two of them had sticks that they used to beat trash can lids at either end of the building. The sound was deafening. RIs strode up and down the center of the building, pulling students from their beds and shoving them toward the door. They were screaming at the top of their lungs, but we could not understand a thing they said. It was too loud, but I certainly got their drift as I watched several students being pulled from their top bunks and crashing into the floor below. Men were being dragged out of the building and thrown into the gravel outside.

"Do push-ups!"

"Roll over. Get your feet up six inches, ranger!"

"Do mountain climbers. Push!"

It was mass chaos as pandemonium broke out. There were students in nothing but their underwear, students with one boot on, and students like me, barefoot. I had tried desperately to pull both boots on before exiting the building, but an RI had seen me and drug me out the door.

"Git your dumb fuckin' ass in that formation!" he said.

After my involuntary exit, I was introduced to what I would come to believe is the most sadistic form of exercise torture imaginable: low crawling with my hands in my cargo pockets.

I'd never seen this technique before, probably because it is practiced only by the most sadistic and heartless trainers the army has to offer. To low crawl, one lays flat on the ground. While remaining as low as possible, a soldier must drag one knee up and reach forward with his arm. Then he pulls himself forward while shifting his weight to the other side and reaching with the opposite hand and leg. A soldier moves forward by pulling with his hand and pushing off with his knee.

I was told to put my hands in the cargo pockets of my trousers. Without the use of my hands, my weight was now on my shoulders and knees. I was lying in gravel. "Low crawl, ranger!" the RI screamed at the back of my head, but I wasn't sure how to move.

"Move, ranger!" he said and kicked me in the ribs.

I began to try and crawl, but as I pushed off with my knee, it drove my shoulders into the rocks. It hurt like hell. The boot struck my ribs again. "I said low crawl, ranger!"

I dug deep, bit my lip, and began to crawl. Fortunately, the RI in charge soon told us to get in formation, so we all jumped up and stood in formation—happy to stop low crawling in the rocks. The scene must have been somewhat comical as we stood there in various versions of disarray. The experience itself was anything but humorous.

The RI who took charge was a black staff sergeant named Justice, and never has a man been more aptly named for the role he played. He was of average build and utterly emotionless. Staff Sergeant Justice was the company TAC, which stands for Trainer, Advisor, Coach. Very deliberately, he walked back and forth in front of the formation as he lectured us. Staff Sergeant Justice informed us that we were weak and that many of us would not graduate. "I will break you," he said in a calm tone, and at that moment, I had no idea just how good he was at playing his part. I would, in time, come to despise the man.

He then told us to get down for push-ups, and he counted as we pushed. I heard a ranger about two rows over from me sounding off louder than the rest of

us. His voice carried ever so slightly louder than everyone else. I glanced over at him and saw that it was a big guy, heavily muscled. He must have been six feet four inches tall, and he weighed at least 220 pounds. In the push-up position, his triceps looked like lemons had been glued to his arms. As Staff Sergeant Justice counted, he popped up and down like a piston as if to say, “I can do this all day, sergeant.”

Suddenly, two RIs moved in behind him. Each bent down, grabbed a leg, and hoisted it into the air. Still in the front-leaning rest position, he transferred all of his weight to his arms until they snatched him backward. Then his arms gave way, and he crashed to the ground, landing on his chest and chin. The two RIs then drug him around behind the building by his legs, like a wheelbarrow with a flat tire. I could hear them screaming at him to do push-ups. His mistake? He stood out. *Be the gray guy*, I thought to myself. *Disappear. Do not get noticed.*

The hazing session seemed to last for hours. Spots of blood were visible on several students’ shoulders. Low crawling in the rocks in a tee shirt had turned their flesh to hamburger. After several hours, the smoke session finally began to lose its energy. It was then that I realized we were the only company that was outside getting abused. Bravo and Charlie Company students were fast asleep. Easy Alpha, my ass.

“You may now go to bed, rangers,” Staff Sergeant Justice cordially invited.

It was around 0200. I knew we were in for an early start the next morning, but I had survived the first day. It was a small victory.

Day two began at 0400. After only two hours of sleep, as expected, the lights were switched on, and an RI said, “Get up and get in formation, rangers.”

It was somewhat surreal to think that only 120 minutes prior, all hell had been breaking loose. We were hazed to high heaven, then we turned the lights out, went unconscious for two hours, and now we begin again.

We formed up in our BDUs and boots but wore no headgear. It was freezing cold outside. I stood shivering in the darkness as an RI stepped to the front of our formation to address us. The RI’s head was shaved for two inches above his ears, then a faint taper began and ended in a perfect flattop. The top of his head was pancake-flat and blonde. His cheeks were sunken, and a hawkbill nose

protruded from his bony face. He reminded me of a malnourished vulture. “Rangers,” he said. “This will be a five-mile run. You will run in formation. If you fall back more than one arm’s distance from the man in front of you, you’ll be dropped from the course. If an RI tells you to reach, you will immediately reach out with your hand, and it better touch the man in front of you. If not, you will be told to get out of the formation.”

With that, we were off. The standard for the five-mile run was forty minutes, an eight-minute mile pace, but the course was over rolling terrain. Naturally, our pace varied. There were times we ran at a 6:30 mile pace, and at other times, 9:30. This created a slinky effect as we ran. The front of the formation would top a hill at a slower pace and then begin speeding up as they descended. Small gaps would form as the pace increased, and it was compounded further back in the formation, so those in the back would suddenly have to sprint to catch back up as the gaps formed in the formation.

The RIs took turns calling cadence.

“Here we go,” the RI sang out.

“Here we go,” we answered together.

“Airborne,” sang the RI.

“Airborne,” we answered.

“All the way.”

“All the way.”

“Ranger.”

“Ranger.”

“Coon skin and alligator hide.”

“Coon skin and alligator hide.”

“Makes a pair of jump boots just the right size.”

“Makes a pair of jump boots just the right size.”

“Shine ‘em up, lace ‘em up, put ‘em on your feet.”

“Shine ‘em up, lace ‘em up, put ‘em on your feet.”

“A new pair of jump boots can’t be beat.”

“A new pair of jump boots can’t be beat.”

As one RI called cadence, the others circled the formation like vultures, seeking the weak and faint of heart. If they sensed that a student was struggling,

they would swarm and yell, “Reach, ranger,” and that student would thrust his hand forward. Several times, they gave the order and students could not touch the man in front of them. Those unfortunate souls were plucked from the formation midstride and told to get in the truck that trailed us, which they called the meat wagon. It was over for them.

We never saw them again.

The run finished at the end of Malvesti Field. Colonel Richard J. Malvesti had been tragically killed in a night parachute jump at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, on July 26, 1990. He was serving as the director of operations for Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) at the time of his death. Malvesti Field was named in his honor, and that field is home to an obstacle course and the dreaded worm pit. The first, and rather alarming, thing I noticed was that the entire field was lined with ambulances.

Ambulances!

What is about to happen to us? I wondered. *Why do they need so many?*

Streetlights atop tall poles illuminated the hazy field. Their yellowed light glowed in the misty predawn fog.

Since it would take a while to get all of us through the obstacle course, those waiting their turn were issued a liberal portion of push-ups, flutter kicks, and of course, there was a pull-up bar conveniently located at the start point of the course.

The course itself began with a low crawl. There were several deep trenches, formed from thousands of ranger students pulling their energy-drained bodies through them over the years. Barbed wire stretched over the entire trench, so we had to stay low, which was a challenge because they had flooded the trenches with water. It was forty degrees out, still dark, fog hung thick in the air, and they were about to put us in the water.

Photo by Spc. Tracy McKitheron

SSG Michael Roggero negotiates the worm pit.

The low crawl trenches were approximately thirty meters in length. From there, candidates went into a shed for the horizontal bars. The horizontal bars were monkey bars, but the shed was flooded with about three feet of water. If you fell from the bars, you fell into the water.

Once we completed the horizontal bars, we were to run across another area that was about thirty meters long, and yes, it was flooded with muddy, putrid, stinking water. Next, we were to sprint to a cargo net that hung from a vertical telephone pole forty feet above the ground. We would climb up the net, then throw a leg over the log at the top while bear-hugging it. Then we would grab a rope on the other side, ease over, and descend using the rope.

Alpha Company was first in line, so we didn't get hazed as long as Bravo and Charlie Companies, who had to wait for us to move through the course. It seemed as though there were hundreds of RIs, all screaming and yelling at us. By this point, I'd grown somewhat numb to the screaming. *Just don't get hurt,* I kept thinking. *Get through this without getting injured or noticed.*

Photo courtesy of Defense Visual Information Distribution Service

Major Frank Sobchak on the Malvesti Field Obstacle Course.

I can’t overstate the importance of avoiding injury or sickness. Because rangers are so dirty, cellulitis is common in ranger school, and pink eye has taken entire platoons out. Rolled ankles, falls, slips, sprains, breaks—vigilance, no matter how tired you get, is a key element to survival.

When I was ordered to “Begin, ranger!” I entered the freezing cold, muddy water. The putrid smell of the muddy water made me want to vomit. Even though I was already wet and cold, the water took my breath away. Once under the barbed wire, there were only a couple of inches of space where I could breathe. My head was in the water, so I turned it sideways and tried not to splash too much. Several RIs walked the line carrying big walking sticks with ranger tabs glued to them. They strode up and down the line smacking them into the water, causing the ripples to cover our faces. If we got their attention, they’d poke our backs, so I tried to remain unnoticed.

As I moved along, I saw an RI in front of me. He was tall and thin with long stringy muscles and veins that crisscrossed his arms like webs. He unbuttoned

his trousers and pulled his manhood out. He then began rotating his hips around like he was hula-hooping, causing him to pee in circles in the mucky water in which I crawled. A toothy grin spread across his face.

I hesitated, which merited a sharp poke from a stick. “Did I tell you to stop, ranger?” said another RI who was walking along beside me as I crawled. *No, jackass, he’s just pissing in the water, and I’m not keen to get pissed on,* I thought but wisely kept to myself.

The RI struck me again. “Did someone say you could stop? I guess you think you’re in charge here,” he said, then pushed me downward hard with the stick placed squarely between my shoulder blades, right on my spine. Giving in to the pain, I submerged under the water, and he held me there for several seconds.

When I surfaced, there were two of them screaming at me. I went Hollywood and pretended that they had nearly drowned me, but I did not attempt to answer their questions. In fact, I did not even acknowledge them. I spit and coughed and then crawled as quickly as possible to the end of the obstacle.

Once out of the water, I ran to the horizontal bars shed. An RI was standing in the water inside the building. I began negotiating the obstacle, but I didn’t get past him unscathed. He smacked me in the gut a few times as I passed. It wasn’t hard, just enough to get my attention. I looked down and realized that the water inside the shed was clear. It was clean water, so I pretended to slip and fall into the water to clean some of the mud off my face. Surprisingly, the water inside the building was much warmer, so I dallied as long as possible and even rubbed my face to clean the dirt away from my eyes. That earned me more screaming and a sharp shove to the back. I made my way back to the start and this time went straight through the obstacle.

I exited the monkey bar area and entered the next section, which was just a big pit of muddy water with the cargo net at the end. By this point, my hands were going numb. I was insanely cold, but I only had one more obstacle—climb the cargo net, crawl over the telephone pole, and descend the rope. I sprinted to the cargo net, climbed as fast as I could, and when I got to the top, I hugged the massive log. To my surprise, I was suddenly face-to-face with a fellow ranger student.

He was lying on top of the log, clinging to it, and I could sense his fear.

“Dude, you okay?” I asked.

“I can’t feel my hands or feet,” he said in a feeble, defeated voice. “I can’t get down.”

He was a small guy with blond hair and blue eyes. Steam rose from his head, neck, and shoulders.

“How long you been up here?” I asked.

“I don’t know. A long time. I was in the first rank,” he said and shuddered. His chin involuntarily quivered. He wasn’t in a good place, mentally or physically. I have always feared heights, but somehow, I managed to just deal with it. Being forty feet up, exhausted, and freezing made it much worse, but I knew it had to be done. This young ranger had reached the end of his rope, and he picked a hell of a place to run out of rope. I felt sorry for him—pitied him. I had to try to help him.

It was still dark, and fog hung in the air all around us. He had climbed the net, but he could not reach down to the rope below. That was the challenge of this obstacle. To transition from the pole to the rope required leaning off the side of the pole forty feet up. It was scary, extremely so for those uncomfortable with heights. Because we were so high up, and this ranger was on top of the massive pole, the RIs didn’t even know he was up there. They could not see him from below.

Carefully, I reached down and grasped the rope. It was a nerve-racking stretch, but I got it. We were high above the ground, and there was no safety harness, no net, and nothing but sawdust on the ground below us.

“Here, let me help you get down,” I said.

“I don’t think I can. My hands are frozen.”

“Dude, you have to get down somehow. Here, I’ve got the rope for you. All you have to do is wrap the rope around your leg and slide down. Pinch your feet together on the rope. You’ll be fine,” I assured him. “Take the rope, man. Just pull it to you.”

Hesitantly, he reached with his right hand and grasped the rope. Slowly, he pulled it to him.

“Now, all you have to do is hold on and let your body ease off this log and onto the rope. As soon as you can reach it, wrap your foot around the rope. That

will slow your descent."

He started moving. I had persuaded him. He was finally ready. Slowly, deliberately, he allowed one leg to drop. Maybe he was going to be okay after all. It was the last obstacle on the course. Perhaps he was going to get down with no problem at all. Sometimes, that's all it takes—one step in the right direction. A little faith. Steeling oneself against the unknown. He began to transition from the log to the rope.

Then, all of a sudden, he disappeared.

I had no idea what happened to him. That is, until I heard the unmistakable THUD from forty feet below. He had burned in, as we say. Hit the ground like a space rock, with all the glamour and ceremony that comes with it.

I grasped the rope, held to the log with my arms, wrapped my leg around the rope, and began to descend. When I reached the ground, the ranger was already on a litter being carried off the field. His ranger school was over. We never saw him again.

The worm pit could have taken half an hour to forty-five minutes to complete, but because of all the hazing, it took several hours to get the class through. The sun was now just peeking over the horizon. We stood in a gaggle, shivering, every ranger covered in mud and sawdust from head to toe. There was mud caked under my fingernails, in my ears, in my scalp, and of course, in my butt crack. Every orifice seemed to be filled with sandy Georgia mud and red dirt.

"Okay, rangers, form up," an RI shouted, and we quickly complied.

He marched us back to the barracks, where several other RIs were waiting with a fire hose attached to the hydrant on the street corner. We lined up, and they put the water to us. The force of the water was uncomfortable but not overly painful. We tried to beat and wring the muddy water out of our BDUs as they hosed us down. Once the red water turned clear, an RI ordered, "Get those nasty ass clothes off, rangers." We stripped naked in the street, and they continued hosing us down.

There we stood, fifty butt-ass naked rangers, digging between our butt cheeks to try and get the sand and sawdust out while an RI sprayed us down with a fire hose. For just a second, I almost laughed.

I had completed one more ranger school requirement.

Another small victory.

The remainder of the day was spent in classes and the first session in the hand-to-hand combat pit. The hand-to-hand combat pit is another tricky training block to negotiate without getting injured. Every maneuver involves twisting some body part or throwing, kicking, or punching one's opponent. The key is to throw your ranger buddy hard enough and high enough to gain the approval of the RIs but without hurting him. That was a fine line to walk. History teaches us that no matter how hard students try, the hand-to-hand pit always takes its pound of flesh.

Inevitably, there's that guy, usually the one God blessed with big muscles but taxed with a small brain, who feels the need to demonstrate his physical prowess by tossing his partner around the pit like a rag doll. He's long on lifting but short on cardio, and ranger school is an endurance sport. Ultimately, those big muscles become a burden for many. Nevertheless, the hand-to-hand pit is his domain, so he is to be avoided at all costs. We threw and jabbed and chopped and kicked one another all afternoon.

That night, the RIs put us down around midnight, then left. Once again, I slept in my BDUs, but I did remove my boots to air my feet out. A ranger must take care of his feet. If the feet go, you are done. We'd been wet all day, and my feet had pruned. I needed to air them out the best I could.

Falling asleep is one problem that a ranger student never experiences. No matter how seemingly awkward or uncomfortable the position, ranger students can instantly go to sleep. After a day like the one we'd just had, every student promptly went unconscious. There are no insomniacs in ranger school.

Around 0100, once again, we were awakened rather abruptly, but there was only one RI this time. It was Staff Sergeant Justice, and he wasn't screaming. He simply turned the lights on and firmly ordered us to, "Get outside. Now!"

Several students had to be rousted physically from their bunks due to the depth in which they slept. Once outside, Sergeant Justice put us in formation. He then separated the ranks to create space between us and made us low crawl the length of the barracks on the gravel. We then turned around and low crawled back. We did this over and over for the better part of thirty minutes. Once again, I noted that the other companies were in the barracks sleeping.

As we low crawled repeatedly, men began to grunt, then whine. Our hands and knees were being torn up by the rocks. Finally, Staff Sergeant Justice put us back in formation. He never raised his voice. In fact, he never showed emotion. His language was plain—matter-of-fact.

"Rangers, you suck. You are weak, and I will break you. So many of you want to quit already. Here's what we're going to do," he said. Then he uttered words so unexpected and terrifying that I remember them vividly to this day.

"We're going to go do the worm pit again."

An audible groan could be heard in the ranks. I felt like lightning had struck me in the chest. *Is he crazy?* I thought. *He'll kill us. When we did it this morning, the entire road was lined with ambulances. Now, he plans to put us back through it alone.*

I heard a student behind me whisper, "Just don't move. He can't kick us all out. If no one does it, he can't do a damn thing."

"I'm not doing it," another student whispered.

"He's going to kill someone," yet another said.

Students have died in ranger school. I was aware of quite a few, and I was beginning to see why.

Justice paced in front of the formation. "I'll tell you what, rangers. Some of you are ready to quit now. I know you want to quit, so I am going to make this easy for you. I want all of you to close your eyes and bow your heads. Do it!" he ordered sharply.

We quickly complied. "Don't open your eyes until you are told to do so. If you don't want to do the worm pit again, I want you to raise your hand. You can walk away. It's that easy, but once I get you out of my formation, the rest of us are going to the worm pit. So, if you don't want to do the worm pit, if you want to quit, raise your hand. And keep your eyes closed, rangers."

There was a brief hesitation. Then I heard the sound of BDU fabric moving. Someone was raising their hand. Then another, and another. I could not tell how many, but quite a few had raised their hands. Once the first one quit, it was much easier for the others.

"Now, all of you with your hands raised. You and only you can open your eyes. I want you to fall out of my formation and line up by that door," he said,

pointing.

Those with their hands raised quickly exited our ranks and formed a line by the orderly room. Once they were out of the formation, Staff Sergeant Justice proudly said, “Okay, the rest of you can open your eyes now. All of you, fall back into the barracks. Rest well, rangers.”

And just like that, the pain was over for us, and ranger school was over for those who had raised their hands. We never saw them again.

I went straight to my bunk and took my boots off. Before I lay down, I looked at my watch to see how many hours of sleep we might get. The pale light on my watch illuminated the numbers 0220. The date read 11-04-92. It was my birthday.

Everything one needs to know to graduate ranger school is in the Student Handbook 21-76, also known as the Ranger Handbook. There are no hidden agendas, no secrets, and no tricks. If you follow the standards, as written in the Ranger Handbook, you will pass ranger school. On the surface, it sounds simple. Just matriculate through ranger school by following the instruction book. As we would see, it was far more difficult in application.

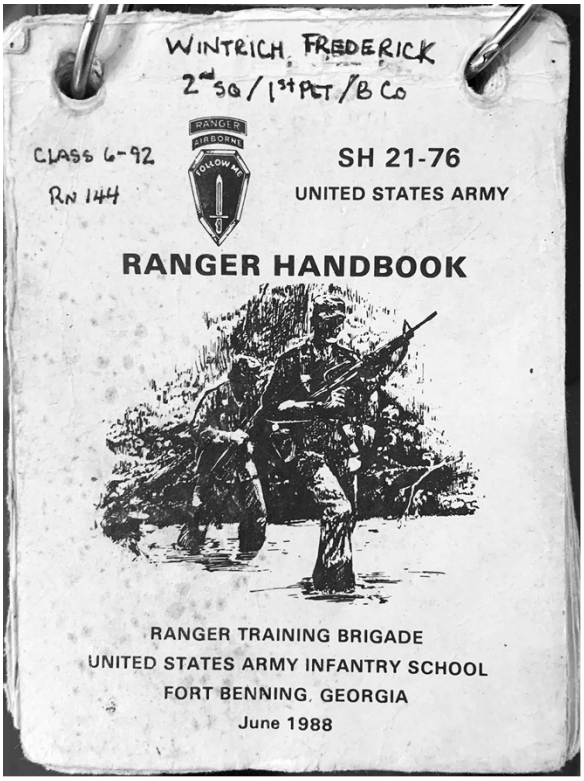


Photo by Fred Wintrich

The Ranger Handbook Fred Wintrich carried through ranger school.

Beginning on day two, the time between graded events was filled with classes from the handbook. The RIs taught us everything we needed to know to pass our patrols and eventually earn the tab.

Days three and four consisted of another hand-to-hand combat session and more classes. The greatest challenge during classes was to remain awake. As instructors described patrol base operations and troop-leading procedures, unsurprisingly, eyes glossed over, lids grew heavy, and heads began to bounce like bobbers on a brim pond. I suppose, over time, instructors become more and more creative in applying techniques that are sure to regain a struggling student's attention.

Once again, I was surprised by a novel and rather torturous technique that I had not previously been exposed to. It seemed that ranger school was not only the army's greatest leadership school, but it was also the keeper of the world's most unique methods for getting a soldier's attention. First, low crawling with the hands in the cargo pockets, and now this—koalafication.

When told to koalafy oneself, the ranger sprints to a designated tree and places his hands on the ground. He then kicks his feet up in a handstand against the tree

until he can hug or grasp the tree with his feet and legs above and his arms and head near the base of the tree. He then shimmies up the tree, upside down, as far as possible, and holds on until an RI orders him to “recover.”

It’s an extremely difficult, awkward, and challenging maneuver to accomplish. Sometimes it would take a ranger five minutes just to get into position on the tree. It seemed rather entertaining for the RIs to watch us struggle to try and mount a tree inverted, and it always achieved its desired effect. We woke up.

On the third day, we also began conducting react-to-contact, or immediate action, drills. These drills simulate what a ranger patrol should do when attacked by the enemy, and they all tie back to Major Robert Rogers. His rules of ranging, written in the 1700s, have stood the test of time. There are now twenty-nine rules, and the language has been somewhat modernized, but we were learning how to conduct operations just as Rogers taught his men.

1. All Rangers are subject to the rules of war.
2. In a small group, march in single file with enough space between so that one shot can’t pass through one man and kill a second.
3. Marching over soft ground should be done abreast, making tracking difficult. At night, keep half your force awake while half sleeps.
4. Before reaching your destination, send one or two men forward to scout the area and avoid traps.
5. If prisoners are taken, keep them separate and question them individually.
6. Marching in groups of three or four hundred should be done in three separate columns, within support distance, with a point and rear guard.
7. When attacked, fall or squat down to receive fire and rise to deliver. Keep your flanks as strong as the enemy’s flanking force, and if retreat is necessary, maintain the retreat fire drill.
8. When chasing an enemy, keep your flanks strong, and prevent them from gaining high ground where they could turn and fight.
9. When retreating, the rank facing the enemy must fire and retreat through the second rank, thus causing the enemy to advance into constant fire.
10. If the enemy is far superior, the whole squad must disperse and meet again at a designated location. This scatters the pursuit and allows for organized resistance.
11. If attacked from the rear, the ranks reverse order, so the rear rank now

becomes the front. If attacked from the flank, the opposite flank now serves as the rear rank.

12. If a rally is used after a retreat, make it on the high ground to slow the enemy advance.
13. When laying in ambuscade, wait for the enemy to get close enough that your fire will be doubly frightening, and after firing, the enemy can be rushed with hatchets.
14. At a campsite, the sentries should be posted at a distance to protect the camp without revealing its location. Each sentry will consist of six men, with two constantly awake at a time.
15. The entire detachment should be awake before dawn each morning as this is the usual time of enemy attack.
16. Upon discovering a superior enemy in the morning, you should wait until dark to attack, thus hiding your lack of numbers and using the night to aid your retreat.
17. Before leaving a camp, send out small parties to see if you have been observed during the night.
18. When stopping for water, place proper guards around the spot, making sure the pathway you used is covered to avoid surprise from a following party.
19. Avoid using regular river fords as these are often watched by the enemy.
20. Avoid passing lakes too close to the edge, as the enemy could trap you against the water's edge.
21. If an enemy is following your rear, circle back and attack him along the same path.
22. When returning from a scout, use a different path as the enemy may have seen you leave and will wait for your return to attack when you're tired.
23. When following an enemy force, try not to use their path, but rather plan to cut them off and ambush them at a narrow place or when they least expect it.
24. When traveling by water, leave at night to avoid detection.
25. In rowing in a chain of boats, the one in front should keep contact with the one directly astern of it. This way they can help each other and the boats will not become lost in the night.
26. One man in each boat will be assigned to watch the shore for fires or movement.
27. If you are preparing an ambuscade near a river or lake, leave a force on the opposite side of the water so the enemy's flight will lead them into your

detachment.

28. When locating an enemy party of undetermined strength, send out a small scouting party to watch them. It may take all day to decide on your attack or withdrawal, so signs and countersigns should be established to determine your friends in the dark.
29. If you are attacked in rough or flat ground, it is best to scatter as if in rout. At a pre-picked place you can turn, allowing the enemy to close. Fire closely, then counterattack with hatchets. Flankers could then attack the enemy and rout him in return.

We would use these drills and rules for ranging or patrolling throughout ranger school. They were the standard against which we would be graded. There is a drill for reacting to a near ambush, far ambush, artillery, and sniper fire.

When encountering a near ambush, we would immediately assault right through the enemy. The wisest option was to turn on them and essentially charge because we had walked right into their ambush at close range. Trying to run away would only increase the likelihood of more people being shot because running away would expose them for a greater amount of time in the engagement area.

If attacked by a far ambush, we would dive to the ground and begin returning fire. We would then have a portion of our patrol lay a base of fire, while the other portion moved back away from the enemy. One portion of the patrol covers the other, while they bound back and break contact with the enemy. The key is to quickly get out of the enemy's kill zone.

When moving or bounding under fire, we used three-to-five-second rushes. That's what they are called—rushes—and preferably, they only last three to five seconds. During basic training, every soldier is taught to repeat a little jingle to himself while he moves, so he doesn't stay up and exposed too long. The soldier shouts to his buddy, "I'm moving," to let him know to shoot at the enemy and hopefully keep their heads down while he moves.

The soldier then gets up and runs to a new position, preferably one with cover, like a tree or mound of dirt. While he runs, he says to himself, "I'm up. He sees me. I'm down." And he dives to the ground.

When engaged by a sniper, we'd all hit the ground instantly. We'd then lay a

base of fire in the direction that we thought the sniper had shot from. Since a sniper usually takes long shots, it can sometimes be challenging to determine exactly where he is. Also, in mountainous terrain, or in a city, it's very difficult to discern direction and distance. However, once he was located, we'd call for artillery on his position.

Finally, we practiced reacting to artillery. Artillery simulators would do exactly as their name suggests—when detonated, the simulator would whistle and then explode, and if you were close, you might pee yourself just a little. The boom was quite convincing. The sound replicated artillery rounds whistling as they fell from the sky. Then the loud boom of the impact. This drill begins with everyone in the patrol screaming *incoming* when they hear the whistle. Everyone dives to the ground to seek cover. After the initial explosion, the patrol leader shouts out a clock direction, based on the direction the patrol was traveling, and a distance, such as, "Twelve o'clock, 400 meters."

Everyone then repeats the direction and distance to ensure that all the soldiers know which direction and how far to run. Then everyone makes a run for it. With artillery, we simply wanted to get out of the impact area before the next volley of artillery was fired. Ideally, in training, you run in a direction that's relatively close to the direction you were already going, so you don't have to backtrack or get too far off course.

We would do these drills a thousand times in ranger school, so it was important that we practice them at Camp Rogers to form a solid foundation. The true purpose of the drills was to make them second nature. If a ranger is walking along and hears a pop in the distance, he should not even have to think about it. Because of the drills, he'd recognize it as a sniper and simply react. The same is true with a near or far ambush—ingrain the reaction so tired, hungry rangers react appropriately under fire.

On the fourth day, I awoke to the beating of a trash can lid once again. "Let's go, rangers. Get your asses up," the RI said, and even in a semiconscious state, I noticed the subtle difference. The RIs usually instructed us to get our "sorry" asses up. Today, they just ordered us to get our asses up. Small victories.

As I pulled my boots on, a ranger in the bunk next to me walked back to his bed, dirty and sweaty. As he peeled the sweat-drenched shirt over his head, I

realized he'd been out getting smoked. "Where have you been?" I whispered.

"Smoked all night," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"The student company commander told the RIs that the squad leaders were not supporting him, so Staff Sergeant Justice took us out last night—four of us," he said. "He made us low crawl across the gravel all night."

"All night?"

"Yes, he told us that he would low crawl us until one of us quit or the sun rose," he said.

"Did anyone quit?" I asked.

"No."

Sometime around noon, they put us on busses and drove us out to the Yankee Road land navigation course. I was looking forward to land navigation because it came very easy for me, and it would be the first time since reporting to ranger school that I would be alone in the woods. I've always been able to look at a map and see the terrain—terrain association. Knowing I'd be able to run through the course quickly, I planned to finish as rapidly as possible, then move to a spot near the finish, hide, and get some sleep. It was risky because I would be counting on the alarm on my watch to wake me up. I was tired, so I feared that it might not be loud enough to wake me, but I was willing to risk it for a little rest.

The land navigation course is an individual event. It begins during the day and ends at night. Each ranger student is given a map and a set of grid coordinates. We were to make our way, using the map and a compass, to specific locations, where we would find a small orange flag with a punch hanging from it. To prove he had been there, each soldier had to punch a card beside the point he had located. Each punch had a unique pattern, so it was very difficult to cheat.

We arrived with plenty of time to spare, so we had some time to kill. My squad of rangers sat on the ground in the woods, eating our MREs while we waited. I drew MRE Menu Four that day. The main course was an omelet with ham. The package included potatoes au gratin, an oatmeal cookie bar, cheese spread, crackers, and accessory packet B, which meant a Tootsie Roll.

Since it was cold and I had time, I decided to heat the omelet and potatoes

before eating them. I'd stuff the oatmeal cookie bar, crackers, and cheese spread in my pockets. I planned to eat them on the move later in the afternoon. As I opened the omelet, a ranger named Jones spoke up.

"Hey, Blackmon, you wanna trade your potatoes au gratin for a ham slice?"

"Potatoes for a ham slice? Are you serious?" I asked, surprised.

"I'm a vegetarian," he said. "This ham slice MRE has potatoes too, so if I have two packs, that'll be a good meal."

How can a vegetarian make it through ranger school? I wondered. *He's nuts, but a ranger will trade potatoes for a ham slice all day long, so he'll have takers.*

"Yeah, I'll trade, but I think you're gonna have a hard time with ranger school as a vegetarian," I said, shaking my head in amazement.

He didn't respond.

"Is this a religious thing, or do you just not like eating animals?" I asked.

"It's a healthy way to live, man."

"I don't think it's healthy for ranger school," I said.

"Ah, I'll survive," he countered.

"For now, maybe. We'll see if it lasts," I said.

Jones tossed me the ham slice, and I threw the potatoes to him. I'm no vegetarian, but I'm happy to help a man adhere to his beliefs when I can.

Once they gave us our points, I quickly began plotting them on the map. With all the points mapped, I chose the order in which I would go after them. Using a protractor, I then drew lines from point to point and calculated the azimuth I would have to walk from one point to the next. Again, using the protractor, I measured and recorded the distance from point to point. With an azimuth and distance, I would simply stand at one point, shoot an azimuth with my compass, look for something, like a tree or a tower on the horizon, and begin walking a straight line to that point. Every so often, I'd stop and shoot an azimuth to ensure I was still on course.

It's critical that you remain on course, particularly if you do not terrain associate well. In aviation, there is a rule called the One in Sixty Rule. It states that if an aviator is one degree off, after flying sixty nautical miles, he will be one nautical mile off course. It's funny how seemingly inconsequential mistakes

at the beginning can have disastrous consequences if left uncorrected. The little things truly matter. Stay on course from the beginning. That's the key.

When walking in the woods, rangers encounter obstacles. One must be cognizant of which hand is dominant. Right-handed people tend to go around big trees or bushes on the right side. If one passes on the right side every time for over a half a mile, they'll wind up well off-course to the right. When looking for nothing more than a small piece of orange silk or an orange-and-white sign, it is critical to remain on course. With that in mind, I would alternate right and left as I circumnavigated obstacles.

To measure the distance, I used my pace count. At the barracks, they had one hundred meters marked on the ground. I simply walked one hundred meters and counted every time my left foot hit the ground. As for me, I walked the hundred yards merely to confirm my pace count. Having navigated for years, I knew my pace count well. As a ranger navigates from one point to the next, he counts off in one hundred-meter increments. Once he gets to one hundred, he moves a bead on a string that hangs from the shoulder strap of his equipment. They are called ranger beads. If the next point was 550 yards on a 250-degree azimuth, he would walk on the azimuth for 550 yards, then begin looking for the orange flag. He would move a ranger bead every one hundred meters, just in case he loses count.

Academically, it sounds rather easy to walk a relatively straight line for a given distance, but the terrain is challenging. When navigating cross-country, a ranger must cross creeks, climb hills, fight through brush piles, wade in swamps, and the list goes on. Some people struggle with seeing terrain features in the form of contour lines on a map and associating them with the actual terrain they are looking at.

At night, I would not be able to shoot an azimuth and see something in the distance to orient on, so I chose to go to the farthest points during daylight hours, and I saved the short legs for the night. When we were told to begin, I shot my first azimuth, found a tree on the horizon, and took off at a jog. I was able to collect the day points rather quickly. On some of them, I did not use the azimuth and distance method. Rather, I used the terrain to circumnavigate obstacles such as swampy areas, which are common in South Georgia. I would simply run down a ridge or even wade into a creek bed to get around areas that were

difficult to traverse.

Once it was dark, I was forced to slow down and ensure that I remained on the azimuth, but I had planned well. I had to move much slower at night, but the distance from point to point was shorter for my night points.

With all my points collected, I began making my way back to the endpoint. I found a spot about 200 meters from the finish where a tree had fallen. I lay back in the crook of a limb, set the alarm on my watch, strapped it to my gear right beside my neck, and closed my eyes.

I didn't immediately fall asleep. I was scared. Scared I would not wake up. I was worn-out, nothing like what was coming, but already, I felt the chronic fatigue setting in. It felt good to sit down with no one around. There were no RIs screaming, kicking, or pressing me for an answer. There were no obstacles, there was no skill to demonstrate. *Will this watch wake me up?* I wondered. *Please, Lord, let this watch wake me up.* If I didn't return on time, they would either drop me from the course or recycle me from the beginning.

An hour later, I was awakened by the beeping on my neck, and instantly, I felt relief. I got up, moved to the finish line, and turned my card in. One hour of sleep felt like a full night at that point. I felt like I had stolen something from the RIs—a small victory. Now, I was alert and energized, at least for the moment.

Day five was anything but easy, but it was perhaps the most fun, if such a thing exists in ranger school. We were rousted at 0400, then bussed to Victory Pond. We filed into bleachers that overlooked a sawdust pit in front of a rappel tower, which sat right on the water's edge. Behind the rappel tower, out over the water, were the log walk, rope drop, and suspension traverse or "slide for life" as most know it—aerial obstacles over water.

Once we were seated, an RI explained that we would begin by watching a Rangers in Action demonstration. One RI narrated as others demonstrated all the hand-to-hand skills we had learned, the rappelling techniques we would be taught during mountain phase, and several other aerial mission sets. They acted everything out as if they were in a combat situation. Finally, the RIs demonstrated what we would be required to do that day—the log walk rope drop and the suspension traverse.

I had ridden many suspension traverses in my career, but the thing that got my

attention with the one at Victory Pond was how steep it was. The tower was seventy-five feet tall, and the cable went straight down to the water. The steepness meant speed. When the RI demonstrating the obstacle hit the water, it sounded like a bomb going off. He must have been traveling in excess of twenty miles per hour when he hit the water. The other thing on my mind was Fred Wintrich's story from just a few months prior.

Fred Wintrich was my college roommate. He had graduated from ranger school in May. An animated character of epic proportions, Fred spent hours vividly recounting every detail about his class to try to prepare me. He had warned me how high and steep the suspended traverse was at Victory Pond, but he also told me that the slide began over very shallow water. If it was a particularly dry year, there would be no water below you at the beginning, and there is no safety harness. You must hold on to a T-bar throughout the slide, then let go and fall into the water at the end.

"Blackmon," Freddie had said. "You want to hold on to that bar tight. Dry your hands as much as you can, and don't let that fucker go. A dude died in my class because his hands slipped off."

"You're kidding," I had said.

"I shit you not," he said emphatically. "Sergeant Benjamin Freed of the 82nd Airborne Division. He fell seventy-five feet. They treated him until the medevac arrived to transport him to the hospital. Then, as soon as the medevac departed, training continued. They just hauled him off, and we went right back to training!"

Fred then hesitated for dramatic effect. Then, raising his brow and opening his eyes wide, he pointed at my hands and said, "Dry those paws before you grab that bar, Blackmon. And squeeze that fucker tight."

Now, as I looked at the tower, I noticed a safety net attached. Obviously, it had been installed rather quickly as a result of the accident. It was made out of two-inch grass ropes. If a ranger fell into the net, any exposed skin would be burned. I suppose they didn't want us to die, but if we did fall, they wanted it to hurt.

To negotiate the log walk rope drop, students climb a forty-foot ladder to a log. The log is approximately six inches wide. The student walks the length of

the log, but in the middle of the log there are a series of steps, which he negotiates by stepping up and down, then continues to the end of the log. Once at the end, he must transition to a rope. To do this, the ranger grasps the rope and hangs from it. Then he throws a leg up and over the rope so he can monkey crawl backward for about twenty yards to a large ranger tab suspended from the rope.

Once the ranger student reaches the tab, he slaps the tab, removes his legs from the rope, and hangs with just his hands. The ranger student then asks the RI observing the obstacle for permission to drop. When the RI gives permission, the student lets go and drops forty feet to the water, but he must scream out, “Rangers Lead the Way,” as he falls.

It took the majority of the day for our entire class to complete the training. The log walk rope drop was particularly slow-moving. Adjacent to the training area, there was a practice beam about six inches off the ground. It was a direct replica of the beam we would negotiate forty feet above the water.

Interestingly, it was easy to cross the six-inch beam. In fact, I could run down the beam, step up and down, then run to the other end with ease, but being forty feet up was a different animal altogether. Some rangers slid their feet forward, inching their way across the beam, all the while being screamed at by the RIs. “Hurry up, ranger. Get your ass off my log!”

Photo by Staff Sergeant Justin Morelli

Captain Robert Killian, Best Ranger Competition Winner and Spartan Race World Champion, negotiates the steps forty-feet above Victory Pond.

Other students did well until the steps, where they froze. They simply could

not force themselves to take that step up. A ranger frozen on the log caused the line to back up. Of course, RIs made students koalafy themselves to occupy the time. Other students would reach down with their hands and essentially crawl over the steps while holding on. As for me, I tried to imagine that I was only inches off the ground. I did my best to not look down at the water. The most challenging part was the steps in the middle of the beam. I could feel the fear in my chest when I got to them, but I was able to compartmentalize it and slowly make it over the top and down.

Day five concluded back at Camp Rogers, where the RIs told us to pack our rucksacks for the road march to Camp Darby the following morning. As I stuffed my gear into my ruck, it dawned on me that I had spoken very few words to anyone in a week. Here and there, we'd talk a bit during ranger handbook training or when we ate our MREs, but I had not truly gotten to know anyone. In fact, I'd spoken very little to the other two rangers in my company with whom I'd trained in preparation for ranger school. I wondered if the course was designed that way, meant to isolate us.

US Army photo by Spc. William Ploeg

Ranger school was extremely challenging mentally for each of us. To be certain, it was also physically challenging, but we had prepared for that. What few of us knew about ourselves was how we would respond to the extreme mental stress and fatigue. For those who made it through, it would teach us things about ourselves that we did not currently know.

It was not lost on me, however, that despite our lack of communication, we seemed to work well together. We were a group of strangers with a common

goal. Each man knew that he required the support of those around him to succeed; therefore, it was in his interest to reciprocate that support. So, without much conversation, we worked together to negotiate one of the world's most demanding courses. The weather, extreme fatigue, hunger, and RIs would conspire to test us in ways we'd never been tested before. Each man would suffer individually, but cooperation and teamwork would be the key to success or failure.

That night, I lay all of my equipment out and began packing. I opened a standard plastic army identification holder. In it, I carried two ranger tabs and a picture of my wife. It's a tradition to carry a tab in your pocket through the course—and it's considered good luck if that tab has already been carried successfully through the course by another ranger. I carried a tab that had gone through ranger school in the year I was born—1968. Colonel (Ret) Fred Wintrich carried the tab through the November–January class in 1968. He gave that same tab to his son, Fred Jr., who carried it through from March to May 1992, then he gave it to me. This would be the tab's third journey through ranger school. I was determined that I would not be the first ranger to fail that lucky tab.

I carried a second tab that I planned to wear after graduation, and I carried a picture of my wife—added motivation to not return home a quitter.

After a solid three hours of sleep, the lights came on. "Get up, rangers. Stack your duffle bags outside and ruck up."

The time had come to road march to Camp Darby.

The duffle bag is called a B bag. It contained all of the clothing and gear that would not fit into our rucksacks. We carried extra BDUs, boots, and underwear in the B bag because we'd obviously need more than we could carry in our rucks. All additional equipment went into our B bags.

As fate would have it, my squad was designated as the support squad for the road march. That meant extremely heavy loads. The average load for a ranger student is sixty-five to seventy-five pounds. The M60 machine gun weighs twenty-three pounds. The weight of the tripod is sixteen pounds. That's thirty-nine pounds, not counting three basic loads of 7.62mm ammunition. The support squad carries three guns, three tripods, and three basic loads of ammunition per gun. That's a heavy load for every ranger in the support squad. Each man carried

eighty to ninety pounds.

The rucksack was so heavy that we could not hoist it onto our backs. We would lie down on the ground with the ruck, put our arms into the shoulder straps, roll over to our hands and knees, then stand up. This task of "rucking up" with an eighty-pound rucksack would become more and more difficult as our bodies deteriorated.

Photo by author

Jimmy Blackmon's Ranger Tabs.

"Alright, rangers. You know the deal," a sergeant warned. "Don't fall back more than one arm's distance from the ranger in front of you."

The road march is eighteen miles over rolling dirt and gravel roads that snake their way through Georgia pine trees from Camp Rogers to Camp Darby. An RI set the pace at the front while the others circled the formation like vultures. The formation held together pretty well for the first ten miles or so. Then fatigue began to show. Exhausted rangers started falling back. At first, it was slight, but then more and more, until it was clear that, if told to do so, they could not reach the ranger in front of them. Other rangers began to limp. The gravel roads made our footing uneven. This caused our ankles to hurt and blisters to form.

I noticed that the RIs weren't as quick to order those falling back to get in the paddy wagon on this forced march. I sensed that the road march to Camp Darby was not a drop event, meaning they did not really plan to kick us out of ranger school so long as we remained relatively tight in formation. However, those who appeared to mentally quit and fall back were immediately removed from formation.

It was like they just quit. One minute they were walking in formation. Then

they began to struggle to keep up. At first, they'd jog to catch back up. Then they'd fall further and further back, until finally they just took a deep breath and began walking slowly—trudging alone to their own tune. It was as though they just gave up.

For those students who fell slightly back but continued to fight to keep up, the RIs would warn them and shove them forward. The ranger would then jog a couple of steps and catch back up. Perhaps it was the fatigue, but the pace seemed to increase the further we went. I have never been a fast walker. I can jog with a ruck on my back all day long, but I simply don't walk fast. Under the added weight of the M60 machine gun, I began to struggle to remain within a hand's reach of the ranger in front of me. I watched the RIs closely. When they weren't looking, I'd quickly jog to catch up.

I got away with it until around mile sixteen when an RI behind me saw me jog and subsequently ran to me. He explained the standards to me in a rather emotional state, then threatened me with being thrown out for failing to follow instructions. He did not realize that I'd clued in to the fact that those who continued to try were not being pulled from the formation. By that point, we were moving out at a very quick pace—like a horse returning to the barn. I struggled to keep up. My arms were dead from carrying the M60. Once again, I began to fall back. The RI returned.

"You ready to quit, ranger?" he asked.

"No, sergeant," I said, looking straight ahead.

"Then why are you falling back? Are you weak, STUD?"

"No, sergeant." I still did not look at him.

"Then why the hell are you falling back?" he asked.

I rolled the dice. Turning my head, I looked straight into his eyes. "Sergeant, I can run to the front of this formation. I'll do it right now. It's not weakness or fatigue, or even the pace. I just can't walk this fast without running," I said, praying he would not knock my lights out.

I could see the wheels turning. "Just keep up, ranger!" he shouted in my face, then jogged off.

It was afternoon when we finally arrived at Camp Darby. "Drink water, rangers!" the RIs said as they walked up and down the line.

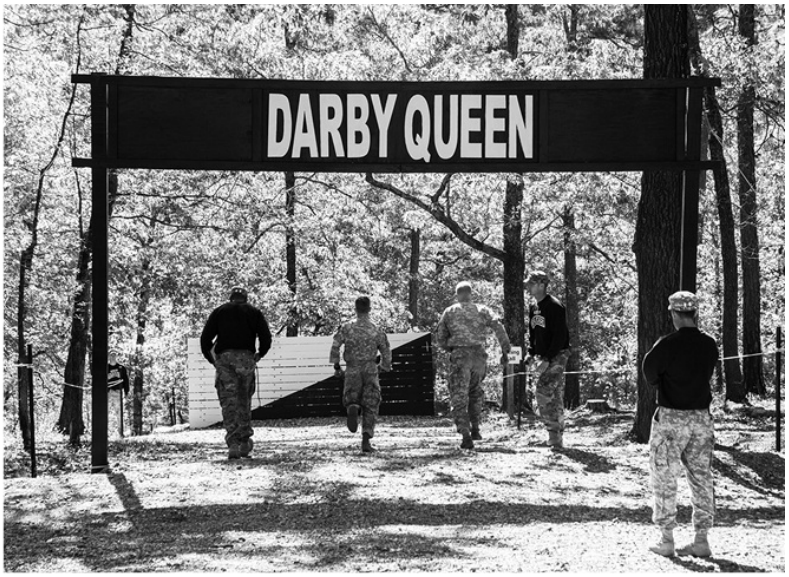
“Get those boots off for a foot check, and you can smoke ‘em if you got ‘em,” another RI said, at which point several rangers lit cigarettes.

Medics began walking the line, inspecting our feet. While blisters were attended to, we lay back on our rucks and ate our MREs. Laying down on the ground felt like heaven. The RIs gave us about half an hour to eat and treat our feet. Then they returned. “Okay, let’s go, rangers. Get your shit together.”

We marched a short distance to the Darby Queen. The Darby Queen is one of the most challenging obstacle courses in any service. It consists of twenty obstacles placed along a one-mile, hilly route under Georgia pine trees.

An RI stepped to the front of the formation. “Okay, rangers. You must negotiate all twenty obstacles. If you NO-GO more than two obstacles, you fail the obstacle course. Is this understood?”

Photo by Staff Sergeant Justin Morelli



Ranger Instructors look on as Rangers begin the Darby Queen.

Inaudible mumbles could be heard throughout the formation. He made it sound as if we would be removed from ranger school if we failed, but I had been told by other students that we would get a major minus spot report. Throughout ranger school, a student can get major minus and major plus spot reports. If a ranger did something exceptionally well, an RI can give him a major plus on the spot. If a ranger failed an event that was not considered a “drop” event, he would get a major minus. He would also receive a major minus if he went to sleep in a patrol base or just did something stupid. A major plus spot report negates a

major minus, so if a ranger received a major minus, the system motivated them to try and do something good to earn a major plus.

We were told that three major minus spot reports would result in a recycle of that phase and possibly a drop from the course. Years later, Fred was assigned to the Ranger Training Brigade as a company commander in the Benning phase. “What actually happens behind the scenes is a little different,” he later told me. “If a ranger student gets three major minus spot reports, they hold an academic evaluation board. They will look at the ranger’s peer ratings and patrols as well. They look at everything because they want to determine if the dude just had a run of bad luck or if he truly is a shitty ranger. Believe it or not,” he said, “the RIs don’t want to get it wrong. Still, they do want the shitty ranger to exit stage left.”

I decided not to test the system, so I planned to successfully complete all of the obstacles on the Darby Queen. However, I would fail in this endeavor. What I didn’t count on was that the throughput would be slow. As rangers NO-GO an obstacle, they try them over again. Some obstacles take a long time to negotiate, so naturally, we got backed up at some points, and RIs never let rangers stand around with nothing to do. They made us do push-ups, flutter kicks, and koalafy ourselves. We had just road-marched eighteen miles, were now conducting one of the most challenging obstacle courses on the planet, and they decided to smoke us between obstacles. And smoked, in this case, turned out to be an understatement.

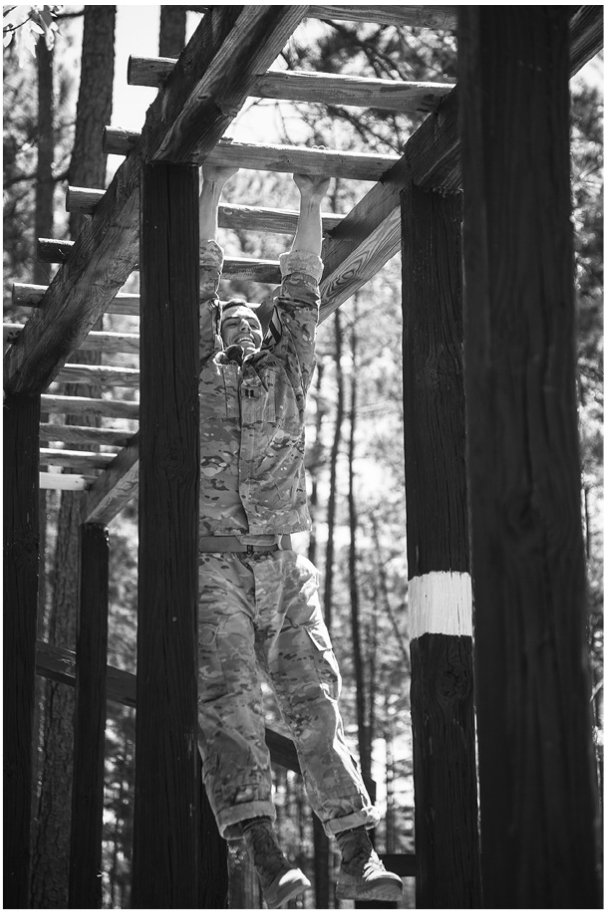
I managed to make it through all but one obstacle. That was the monkey bars. It’s actually called the horizontal ladder, and on the Darby Queen, it is a very long Z-shaped obstacle. What I found most difficult was that the bars we had to grasp were made of wood, and they were at least five inches in diameter. I could not grasp the bar with my whole hand. I could only hook my fingers over the bar, and the wood was slick as glass from thousands of rangers grasping them over the years. On the first attempt, I made it about two-thirds of the way before my hand slipped and I fell. The second time, I was panicked. I had not failed an obstacle yet, but I didn’t know what lay ahead. I had to get through the obstacle.

I made it across the bottom portion of the obstacle and then slowed at the turn. Slowing down helped me to be more careful, but I began to feel the burning in

my hands and forearms. My hands were weak from holding my body weight. Down the long side of the obstacle, I tried to increase my speed yet remain vigilant. I made it to the second turn and slowed back down, but as soon as I did, my hands began to slip. Soon, I was only holding on with my fingertips.

I pulled up with one arm to reset my opposite hand. When I placed my hand back on the bar, it hooked but almost immediately began slipping off again. My knuckles were white, and my forearms were on fire. I had to get through the obstacle, and I knew I didn't have much time left. In desperation, I decided to go as fast as I could to the end. I only made it three rungs before my hands slipped off, and I fell to the ground. I was a NO-GO for the horizontal ladder. I felt the strike of fear and anxiety in my chest. There was no margin for error now. I simply could not fail another obstacle. Fortunately, I made it through the rest of them, but it was a nervous journey.

That evening, we moved into small open bays where we would spend the next few days sleeping on the ground, planning missions, rehearsing, and patrolling. Word got around that one of our fellow ranger students had been injured that day. His name was Perry Black, but everyone called him Doc because he was a medic in the 75th Ranger Regiment. Doc Black was thin and fse and a visible Adam's apple. The absence of rank on his uniform could not mask the fact that he was a noncommissioned officer. Everything about his confident, matter-of-fact demeanor said sergeant.



Courtesy photo 55th Combat Camera

Captain Christian Groom negotiates the horizontal bars on the Darby Queen during the Best Ranger Competition.

Doc had already been to ranger school the previous winter but had been injured in mountain phase. He had hefted his rucksack onto his back and felt a tear in his gut. It was a hernia that would require surgery. He recovered from surgery, went straight back to training, and began ranger school all over again with our class.

As he was negotiating an obstacle on the Darby Queen that day, he had jumped a log but caught his foot and fell. He landed on his face and broke his nose. The medics took him to the hospital on Fort Benning to set it. He demanded that they return him to Camp Darby immediately. Upon return, the RIs told him that he was a medical drop. Doc Black looked them in the eye and said, “I didn’t come here to go home. I have already been dropped medically last winter. I am going straight through this course, and I sure as hell ain’t leaving for this.”

The RIs chuckled and told him to join his squad. Even in a place as harsh as

ranger school, there is something to be said for standing up for yourself. In fact, they seemed to appreciate it.

Camp Darby

November 8, 1992

We slept as squads of nine to ten rangers in planning bays—open-sided plywood shelters with chalkboards and rough plank benches. Outside each hut was a fifty-five-gallon barrel where we were allowed to build a warming fire. As one might expect, that first morning, the RIs woke us early. A hard frost covered the ground, and the crisp air burned our warm lungs. After crawling out of my sleeping bag, I rushed to get my boots on and then did a few push-ups to try and warm up.

"Take care of your personal hygiene and then get your gear ready, rangers. I'll be back in a few minutes," the RI said and walked away.

Not knowing how long he would actually give us, I quickly brushed my teeth and drug a dry razor across my face. The razor pulled rather than cut the stiff whiskers. When I finished, my face burned in the cool air. I had been told that by midway through desert phase, our beards would essentially stop growing. The extreme loss of lean body mass seems to cause the body to stop, or significantly reduce, the production of testosterone. Thus, we'd only have to shave every week or so.

Normally, we'd have put camo on our faces and hands, but winter classes do not wear camo. The green, brown, and black camouflage conceals the skin, so RIs have a hard time detecting frostbite or frostnip under the paint on our faces. Looking at some of my fellow rangers, dirt did enough to help them blend into the environment anyway.

The RI soon returned and led us on a patrol. He gave us instructions as he went. He taught us how to properly cross large open areas (danger areas) and how to use hand and arm signals to communicate without speaking. Essentially, we walked through all the principles and techniques of patrolling. Everything we needed to know was in the ranger handbook. It was just a matter of practicing

them together until we perfected them. Until they became second nature. Until we could work as a team without verbally communicating.

The army's training philosophy is crawl, walk, run, and it is a proven methodology. During the crawl phase, the RI would lead and teach us. During the walk phase, we would lead the patrols, but the RI would shadow us closely and make corrections as necessary. During the run phase, we were on our own, and the RI graded us.

In concert with crawl, walk, run, during each block of instruction, we received an explanation, demonstration, and practical application. The instructor explained how to do something, then he showed us how to do it, and finally, he had us do it. This very simple, organized method of instruction is precisely how the US Army has quickly and effectively transformed farm boys and bankers alike for the wars of the past century. Once each of us was individually trained, it was just a matter of putting it all together. Rangers had to work as a team.

Volumes have been written about the importance of teamwork. Perhaps in no other institution on earth is teamwork so vital as in militaries. It's literally a life-and-death necessity. Each of us had been through army basic training, where the foundational building block is to break individuals down and then build them back up as a team. Each of us understood that in order to earn our tab, we were required to work together. When in charge, we'd need the support of our fellow rangers to pass our patrols. When not in charge, despite every fiber of our bodies wanting to go to sleep, we'd have to dig deep and be a team player.

That afternoon, the RIs called out a list of names. It was all of the rangers that needed to complete jump refresher training. If a ranger had not jumped out of an airplane in 180 days, he was required to go through a jump refresher. The ground portion is fairly easy to conduct in any location, but we had to travel to the airborne school to accomplish some of the training with their equipment.

Having spent the past year in flight school, I was not current, so my name was on the list. They took us to a large field that afternoon, where a jumpmaster yelled, "Hit it!" and we simulated jumping out of an airplane. This drill is designed to practice a good, tight body position, head tucked, hands on your reserve, feet and knees together. This is important because the initial jump and

landing are both violent events.

When one jumps from an airplane traveling at ninety knots (103 mph), the shock of the chute opening is significant. At that speed, a jumper wants to be in a tight and tense position for the shock of the static line and subsequent chute opening. If the jumper doesn't keep his feet and knees together, the wind will catch them and spin him. Then when the chute opens, the risers are twisted. If they are twisted, the jumper will then spin in the opposite direction as the risers untwist. It is a less-than-ideal position to put oneself in. When conducting airborne operations, a weak exit from the aircraft is the root of many problems.

So, the jumpmaster repeatedly yelled, "Hit it!"

Having heard the command, we'd jump slightly into the air and assume the position. Then we'd yell back, "One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand, four-one-thousand. Check canopy."

When we said, "check canopy," we'd raise our hands to where the risers would be and look around over our heads, simulating that we were checking to make sure we had a good parachute above us. A jumper counts to four because that's about how long it takes for the chute to open when jumping from a high-performance aircraft. When jumping at slower speeds—helicopters, for example—it takes about six seconds for the chute to open because the jumper is falling more vertically.

We practiced the drill, and many others, a hundred times or more, because the army learned a long time ago that repetition is the key to reacting correctly in intense, high-stress situations. We spent several hours that morning on drills. Of course, when someone messed up or wasn't paying attention, there were push-ups or flutter kicks for all, as well as the random koalafication.

That night, we were allowed to build a warming fire in the barrel. A front was moving in, and it was cold and windy. I overheard two RIs discussing the weather. Rain was in the forecast. I tried not to think how miserable it would be if we were cold and wet.

The next morning, we followed the same routine: hygiene, then patrolling. Around 1000 hours, those students requiring the second portion of jump refresher loaded onto busses, and they took us to the airborne school. Staff Sergeant Justice was back in charge.

From the busses, he told our company's first sergeant to march us to the suspended harness. This training device is a parachute harness that allows jumpers to simulate pulling slips to steer the parachute. When used properly, the jumpmaster cinches the leg straps just enough to get the jumper on the balls of his feet, but Staff Sergeant Justice had something else in mind. He cinched the straps up on all of us until our feet were about six inches off the ground. All of our body weight was supported by the leg straps. This training device had the nickname *suspended agony*, but this took the agony to a whole new level.

Staff Sergeant Justice then looked at the other RI who accompanied him, pointed to his watch, and said, "Hey, it's time for lunch. Let's go get something to eat." And they left.

The first half-hour was extremely uncomfortable but bearable. We pulled and tugged at the risers to try and take the weight off our legs. We tried to reposition the straps to provide some relief. As we hung helplessly from the risers, now in severe pain, rangers began to complain to one another. I assumed it was like the threat of a second worm pit adventure—a trick to try and get a few more of us to quit. Only this wasn't a trick or a bluff. We were hanging from the rafters of the building, and the pain was very real. As grown men writhed in pain, I began to get angry.

A conversation ensued in my head. *What is this teaching us?* I wondered. *I can handle hazing, no sleep, and starvation. To break us down in order to show us just what we were capable of, even when we're at the extreme of hunger and fatigue, I get, but what is this torture teaching me?*

I wondered if any other cadre even knew what he was doing to us. Was this part of the program of instruction, or was this some sadistic power trip?

"I can't feel my legs anymore," a ranger said aloud.

"I hope I don't ever want kids because my nuts are gone," another said, and he wasn't trying to be funny.

"Seriously, guys," one ranger said. "The blood flow to my legs is gone. It's like a tourniquet has stopped the blood flow."

Now very vocal, the complaints of pain began to crescendo. Soon, I heard a ranger sobbing. He was in so much pain, he was literally crying. I found myself enraged. No matter how hard I tried, I could not come up with a valid reason for

them to do this to us. I was convinced that it was simply an RI getting off on torturing us.

I'm done, I thought to myself. *I've had enough. This is not training. This is stupid, and when they get back, I'm quitting.*

Just over an hour later, Staff Sergeant Justice and the other RI casually walked from their car to the suspended harness shed. "How you rangers doing?" he asked with a thin, sadistic smile plastered across his face.

"Hurting, sergeant!" one ranger shouted.

"What are you talking about? You want to be a ranger. Can't take a little discomfort?"

If I had been free of the training device, I would have charged him at that moment.

"Okay, let's resume training," he said, and one by one, he lowered us until the balls of our feet touched the ground.

From the suspended harness, we moved to the thirty-four-foot tower. This training device simulates jumping out of an aircraft. We climbed up thirty-four feet, into a mock fuselage. We then strapped ourselves into an actual jump harness. The static line is attached to a cable that descends to the ground about fifty meters away. When told to go, we'd exit the simulator just like we would exit an aircraft. The jumper then free-falls until the slack is taken up, and the cable stops him. Then he slides to the end of the cable and comes to a stop at a berm.

Photo by Paolo Bovo/released

A soldier jumps from the thirty-four-foot tower.

I stood at the base of the tower, staring at Staff Sergeant Justice. Finally, I made up my mind to quit. I walked directly to him and looked him dead in the eye. “What do you want, ranger?” he asked.

But suddenly, the words were lost. I could not form them, could not speak them. I just stood there, staring at him.

“Ranger, you got something to say to me?” he said calmly.

His eyes narrowed and penetrated me. It seemed as though he knew what I was about to say, and he could not wait to hear the words.

“Never mind, sergeant,” I said, as if I had forgotten something I thought I wanted to say. It wasn’t that I had forgotten, of course, but rather, I just could not say the words.

Quit. I quit. When it came to it, I could not dream of uttering those words. Looking at him, I realized how much satisfaction it would give him. It would make his day if I quit. And I’d have to live with that image in my mind for the rest of my life. I’d have to live with those words—I quit—every day.

“Then get your ass back over there in line,” he said.

I returned to the line and completed the training.

That day, I made a decision. I decided that quitting would never be an option for me. Having made that decision, I would never allow internal doubt to enter my mind again. I had come dangerously close to quitting because I felt that quitting was an option. To quit was a way out of the discomfort, or the suck as

we called it. Mentally, I took that course of action off the table.

Once all the rangers had completed jump refresher training, we returned to Camp Darby, where we completed more classes on patrol base operations and patrolling. The following day, we would undertake an airborne operation, then more patrolling in the afternoon.

The temperature was in the thirties that night. We stood around the fire barrel, warming ourselves as much as possible before laying down on the cold ground for the night. We were allowed to sleep in our sleeping bags, which made the night bearable. One by one, rangers got as hot as they could stand by the fire, then ran to their mummy bag, slipped down inside, and zipped it up to try and trap as much heat as possible inside the bag.

The natural instinct is to crawl down inside the mummy bag, zip it to the top, then cinch off the face portion with your head inside, but that's not wise. When we breathe, we emit moisture. If our head is inside the bag, then that moisture gets trapped inside, causing the bag to get wet. When the condensation gets cold, it's even colder inside the bag. It's best to leave at least your nose and lips outside the bag to breathe.

The following morning was breezy and cold, but sunny. Our airborne operation would be a UH-60 Black Hawk blast. We were going to jump into Orion Drop Zone. They bussed us to a large field adjacent to the drop zone, where we rigged (put the parachute on) and went through an inspection called the Jumpmaster Personnel Inspection or JMPI. It's the final inspection that the jumpmaster conducts before we move to the helicopter. Once the inspection was complete, we sat down on the ground in chalks and waited. A chalk is simply a group of paratroopers who will jump together.

The wind had picked up even more since we had arrived at the drop zone. The maximum wind speed for airborne operations is fifteen miles per hour. I wasn't sure what the wind speed was that day, but it was brisk and gusty.

Eventually, several Black Hawks landed in the field. The first chalks of rangers bent at the waist to avoid the main rotor blades and waddled to the helos. The rangers sat down on the floor of the fuselage with their feet hanging outside the aircraft. Once everyone was seated and the jumpmaster was satisfied, he

gave a thumbs up and told the crew chief and pilots they were ready.

The helos departed into the wind and then began circling the drop zone as they climbed higher and higher. At 1,200 feet above the ground, the pilots lined up on the field and headed inbound. Once over the field, the jumpmaster began tapping rangers on the shoulder and, with each tap, shouted, “Go!”

Soon green parachutes littered the sky, but quickly, they began drifting with the wind. A paratrooper doesn’t have much control over a military parachute. Essentially, he is being delivered to the drop zone. It’s up to the pilots to account for the winds and hopefully deliver him inside the drop zone and not the surrounding trees and rivers.

The reason the army doesn’t want jumpers to be able to steer too much is that we often conduct mass tactical jumps. The last thing the army wants is to empower soldiers with the ability to drive around in the air with two hundred paratroopers over a drop zone. They would soon be entangled due to mid-air collisions.

The first pass of jumpers that day landed near the trees, but fortunately not in them. The RIs huddled up after the first pass. After a lengthy conversation, they dispersed. “Wind speed is too high, rangers,” our RI told us. “The jump is canceled. Now move to that trailer and turn your parachutes back in.”

Photo by author

Ranger students tangled in trees at Wimpy Drop Zone during Mountain Phase 1988.

After turning our chutes in, they bussed us back to Camp Darby, and the RI immediately began more patrolling classes. Military planning begins with

receiving an order to conduct a mission. Aside from security, hygiene, rest, and chow, mission planning takes place in the patrol base. The RI issues the mission order to the ranger students in a leadership position, and they begin troop-leading procedures (TLPs). Just like with everything else, the ranger handbook describes in great detail how to conduct TLPs.

These are the eight steps of troop-leading procedures:

1. Receive the mission. Common things the patrol leader must ask at this early stage of planning are: What is the mission? What is known about the enemy? How will terrain and weather affect the operation? What troops are available? How much time is available?
2. Issue a warning order. This is a skeletal plan that informs all the rangers what the mission is, where it will be conducted, and when it should occur. Having received a warning order, subordinate leaders can begin preparations. Issuing a warning order as soon as possible enables parallel planning, thus optimizing the use of time.
3. Make a tentative plan. This is an initial plan based off of the given mission, the known enemy situation, the terrain, troops available for the mission, and time available.
4. Initial movement. This step gets the rangers moving and preparing for the mission.
5. Reconnoiter. When feasible, the patrol leader may move forward to conduct reconnaissance to confirm or deny what he has seen on the map; however, this generally isn't feasible, so the leader relies on a map reconnaissance only.
6. Complete the plan. Having decided on the route the patrol will take to the objective, and a concept of the operation, the leader, in consultation with his planning team, completes the plan.
7. Issue the complete order. The leader briefs his team on the details of the plan. Good leaders brief the scheme of maneuver as a story. They literally tell the story of the operation, step by step, sequentially. This enables the soldiers to visualize how everything is going to happen.
8. Supervise. This is a critical leader task. During this step, the leader has his unit conduct rehearsals. They walk through the mission using a sand table on the ground. Finally, the leader inspects his ranger's equipment. Leaders are responsible for pre-combat inspections.

That afternoon, the RI taught TLPs in great detail. It was a relatively relaxed environment where we could ask questions and learn. It was evident that the RI genuinely desired that we fully understand the standards against which we would be graded. There were clearly no hidden agendas. The following day, the RI would return, and we would plan, rehearse, and execute the mission with him leading us through it, from beginning to end, or 'soup to nuts' as we say.

The night was cold, and the ground was hard. We did not huddle around the fire barrel that evening, nor did we talk for very long before crawling into our mummy bags. We were all tired, and I could tell that some guys were really beginning to struggle with sleep deprivation by that point in the course. Anytime we stopped for more than a minute, rangers would nod off. I had seen several fall asleep while standing.

Prior to ranger school, my biggest concern was sleep, not food deprivation, but I was wrong. Throughout my life, I had struggled with sleep. If I had to drive for more than thirty minutes, I'd have to consume caffeine. Otherwise, I'd fall asleep driving. Yet, so far, I had been able to remain awake. Hunger, however, was beginning to get to me. The hunger came in waves. My belly would ache with emptiness, then after a while, it would subside, only to return a little later on. One ranger remarked, "My bellybutton is eating its way to my backbone," which was true in a sense. Our bodies were literally consuming themselves. It would only get worse.

We woke to see the wind driving in thick clouds of increasingly darker shades of gray. The front was upon us, and I could already smell rain in the air. The RI issued the operations order, and we began TLPs. He watched us carefully, making corrections when necessary. Having attended North Georgia College, I had been prepared well, so I was able to help others out in my squad.

At times like this, I realized how well North Georgia had prepared me for the army. North Georgia College, The Citadel, Virginia Military Institute, and The Citadel, are the four senior military colleges in the US. Cadets are drilled on patrolling, troop leading procedures, road marching, and orienteering. Four years of preparation for entering the army clearly gave us a leg up.

With the mission planned, briefed, and rehearsed, we began our patrol. We

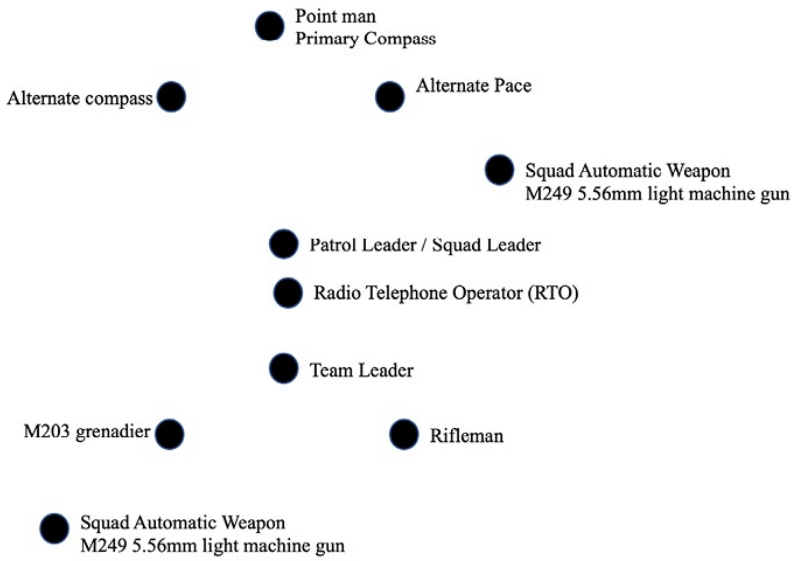
simulated walking across the forward line of troops (FLOT) or “through the wire” as we called it. When a patrol goes into bad guy country, they have to pass through the forward-most friendly unit. This is what going through the wire or crossing the FLOT means.

We had walked about two hundred meters into the Georgia pines when the point man, or lead ranger in the formation, held his hand up with his fist clenched. He halted the patrol, and we all took a knee and faced out. At that point, we conducted SLLS: Stop, Look, Listen, Smell.

Prior to this point in the patrol, we’d been in a friendly area. Our senses did not have to be as well attuned to our surroundings because there was no real threat there. Now that we were in enemy territory, we needed to acclimate to the new environment. We took a couple of minutes to stop, look carefully around us, listen to what the new environment sounded like, determine what it smelled like. We took time to familiarize ourselves with the new surroundings so we’d notice if something was amiss.

Hunting parties have done this for centuries. In a sense, it was a point of transition—time to get our game faces on, so to speak. We were no longer in a place where we could relax and let our guard down. We were now in a place where we could be hunted. I suppose it was because my generation grew up on movies about the Vietnam War, but for me, conducting SLLS conjured up visions of passing through the wire on a mission in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

After a couple of minutes, the point man stood, waved his hand forward, and we continued walking in a wedge formation. We were patrolling as a squad; the diagram below depicts how we moved through the woods.



The duties of point man, compass man, pace, and their alternates can be assigned as the patrol leader desires. The diagram depicts how I prefer to do it when I walk point. Since I navigate well, I like to walk point as if I'm on the land navigation course. I keep the map in my pocket, compass hanging from the chest strap of my equipment, and I count pace as I go. I like the alternate pace and compass men to be to my right and left. They can stop and correct me if I veer off course, but I don't like looking back for direction from a compass man. Again, the duties can be assigned any way the patrol leader desires.

Approximately 800 meters from the objective (where the bad guys are), the patrol stopped and set up an objective rally point (ORP). Ideally, the ORP is a terrain feature away, so that it is hidden and safe. The ORP serves as somewhat of a launching point for the mission. We lay down on the ground in a circle with every man facing out. The patrol leader is in the center of the circle. The first thing we do from the ORP is a leaders' reconnaissance of the objective. The patrol leader takes a couple of rangers with him and sneaks forward to get eyes on the objective, confirming that the enemy is actually there. While looking at the actual objective, he decides how his patrol will attack it.

Before leaving the ORP to move forward for a peek at the objective, the patrol leader issues a five-point contingency plan to the ranger he leaves in charge, usually the senior team leader. Succession planning is obviously critical. We used the acronym GOTWA to remember the five points of the contingency plan.

1. **(G)—Where I am going.**
2. **(O)—Others I am taking with me.**
3. **(T)—Time of my return.**
4. **(W)—What to do if I don’t return.**
5. **(A)—Actions to take if I am attacked and actions to take if you are attacked.**

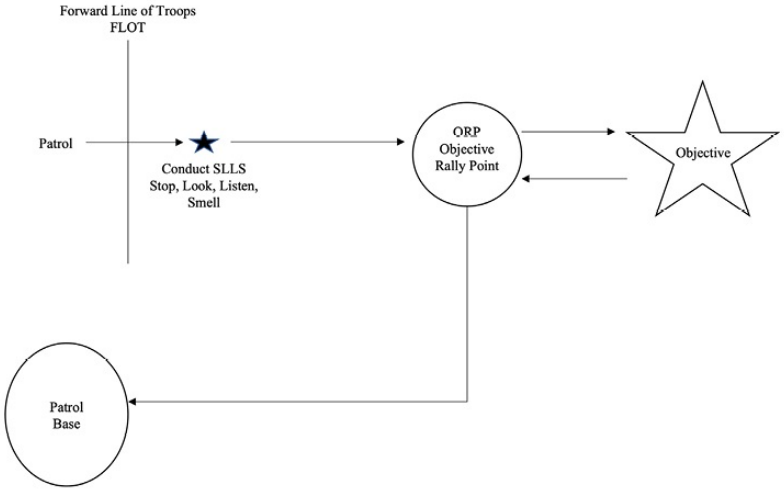
As we practiced that day, the RI observed closely to ensure that the patrol leader followed all of the steps. After issuing the five-point contingency plan, the patrol leader moves forward to the objective. Once he finds the enemy, he has to decide a couple of things. Based on the terrain, he chooses where to put the two squad automatic weapons. Their position is called the support by fire position, and it is best to have them on high ground if possible. He then decides from which direction the rest of the rangers will assault the objective. Again, he takes the terrain into consideration. For example, if there is a stream or river nearby, flowing water makes noise. The noise can be used to drown out the sound of rangers walking in the woods. We try to be as quiet as possible, but it’s impossible to not make any noise.

If there is a river adjacent to the objective, the patrol leader may want to use it to block the enemy’s escape, so that may determine the direction from which he chooses to attack. Once he is satisfied, the patrol leader returns to the ORP and finalizes the plan. He then gathers everyone into a huddle and explains to them how they will attack.

He will explain where to set up the support-by-fire position and the assault-by-fire position, and he will go over the signal to initiate the attack and the signal to lift or shift fires. The attack begins when the patrol leader gives the signal for the support by fire position to begin shooting at the enemy, thus laying a base of fire. The rest of the rangers will be online, ready to attack, but they can’t get too close without being compromised, so the base of fire from the machine guns keeps the enemy’s heads down and focused on them. Meanwhile, the other rangers move forward online. Once they are at the very edge of the objective, the squad leader gives another signal for the support by fire position to lift or shift fires. To lift fires means to stop shooting. To shift fires means just that. The

concentration of fires will move from the objective to a different spot, typically behind the objective.

The reason for lifting or shifting fires is to ensure that the rangers assaulting the objective do not get shot by their own men in the support by fire position. In ranger school this is all academic with blanks, but when real bullets fill the air, it becomes a very serious and important part of the assault.



Once fires are lifted or shifted, the assaulting rangers move forward online and assault through the objective. The rangers attack all the way through the objective to the far side before stopping to take a knee or get down in the prone position (lying flat on the ground). Ideally, the enemy has been killed during the assault, so two designated rangers search their bodies for things that might be useful for intelligence purposes. Meanwhile, during consolidation and reorganization, the other rangers redistribute ammunition among themselves. One ranger may have expended more ammunition than the others, so a ranger that did not shoot as much will give him one of his magazines of ammunition.

Once these things have been accomplished, the patrol leader orders the assault team to move back to the ORP. The support by fire team moves back as well. When they return to the ORP, everyone is accounted for. At that point, rangers pick up their rucksacks, which were left there during the assault, and move to the next patrol base where they plan the follow-on mission.

That afternoon and the following day, the RIs led us through this sequence multiple times. “Okay, rangers,” the RI announced. “We’ve taught you

everything you need to know to pass your patrols. Starting tomorrow, you will lead your own patrols. You will be graded, but during this phase, failures will not count against you. If you pass your patrol, it will count for you, but a failure will not count against you. If you get a major plus spot report, it will also carry forward with you, but a major minus will not. Understand?"

"Roger, sergeant," a chorus of voices confirmed.

Once we left Fort Benning, the RIs would track our patrols. To pass a phase of training, students must have 50 percent or better passes on patrols. So, if a ranger was in a graded position four times during a phase, he must pass two of the four. If he failed three, the RIs would decide to either drop him from the course or recycle him. They could make him recycle and do that particular phase of training over or give him the option of a day zero recycle, which meant starting ranger school over from the beginning. The deeper rangers go into ranger school, the more punitive a day zero recycle is.

That night in the bay, it felt like we were finally starting ranger school. Everything we'd done up to that point had been somewhat of a preparatory test. Sure, it was all a part of ranger school, but it seemed as though it was both an assessment of skills and a weeding out of those who did not have what it took to truly begin the journey for the tab.

We woke the next morning to drizzling rain. Both the graded patrols and the rain had arrived together. I wondered if perhaps the RIs were teaming with Mother Nature to make us suffer more. "Let's go, rangers. Get your shit together and move to the trucks."

I looked to the road and saw a long line of two-and-a-half-ton trucks, or deuce and a halves, as they are called. We packed our gear inside our rucksacks and left our B bags inside the wooden bay. In what was now a steady rain, our squad climbed into the back of one of the trucks. The back was not covered with canvas, so we sat shivering in the cold rain. The army has a knack for hurrying up to wait. It was urgent that we pack our gear and board the trucks. Now, we sat in the rain and waited.

Twenty minutes later, I felt the cold rain flowing down my back and into the crack of my butt. *Once we start walking, it will be better,* I told myself. No one said a word. We all sat with our heads down, staring at our feet, and just took it.

I suppose it was the first time I realized that for the next two months, if it rained, I'd lay on the ground and take it. If a storm came, I'd endure it. I would not be able to go inside and dry my clothes or shower and get clean. I knew these things going into ranger school, but as I sat there in the truck, shivering, cold in the rain, with every inch of my body wet, it was no longer hypothetical.

Finally, one by one, the trucks began cranking, and soon, we were moving. They dropped us off on the side of a dirt road, and for the rest of the day, we patrolled in the rain. That night, we walked back to Camp Darby. As we slogged along, I could feel the water squishing between my toes. The only instruction given that evening was to clean our gear.

Immediately, I removed my boots and wrung the water out of my socks. I powdered my feet and put on dry socks, then my backup boots. Instantly, I felt much better. I would learn that very small things can significantly raise one's morale when one is broken down. Next, I helped build a fire in the barrel. Everyone wanted to try and dry their gear that night. It took a while to get wet wood to burn, but eventually, we had a roaring fire in the barrel. With the fire burning, I sat down on my ruck and took my boots off to inspect my feet. They were pruned, but fortunately, I did not have any blisters. The double sock system had worked well. I wore a thin pair of nylon sock liners with a thick wool sock over them.

I set my wet pair of boots on the ground beside the fire barrel in hopes that they would dry during the night. Even when the fire died down, the hot coals would emit heat for hours. The leather would be slow to dry, but if I got lucky, and we had a dry day the following day, I'd walk them dry. After cleaning my weapon, I turned my boots around to try and dry the other side. Then I found a spot on the ground, crawled into my sleeping bag, and slept.

We were rousted the following morning before daylight. "Get up, rangers," an RI ordered. "Let's get moving."

I pulled my socks on, then my boots, but I didn't lace them up because I planned to wear my wet boots to try and walk them dry. I didn't want to put a pair of wet leather boots in my B bag. I went to the fire barrel and was horrified at what I found: during the night, someone had bumped my boots, pushing them up to the edge of the barrel. The heat from the barrel had caused the rubber soles

to melt. The leather had gotten so hot that it shrank like wool in a dryer and curled up. My boots looked like the curly-toed shoes that a court jester wears, only the entire boot was curled up, and they were now tiny.

I threw the boots into the barrel. Now, I was down to one pair of boots. The only thing that kept my spirits alive was that I only had two days left at Fort Benning. If I survived the next two days, I'd get an eight-hour break to replace broken or lost equipment before moving on to desert phase. During that break, I could go to Ranger Joe's and buy a new pair of boots.

The following two days were cloudy and wet. It was uncomfortable, but I made it through okay—no blisters and no injuries. The RIs were much more hands-off during the last two days of patrolling. Unfortunately, I did not get a graded position. I was disappointed because I had nothing to lose on the Benning patrols, and I felt that the grading was more lenient early on in the course. I'd now have to prove myself in the desert.

We bussed back to Camp Rogers, and the RIs released us for an eight-hour break. Knowing the class schedules for all the army courses at Fort Benning, it seemed that every taxi in Columbus, Georgia was lined up at the gate to take rangers to town. Most of us went directly to Ryan's Steakhouse for the all-you-can-eat buffet.

Eager to get started, ranger students raced from the taxis to the front door. Each of us had an unquenchable hunger. Plate after plate, we loaded up on green beans, meatloaf, mashed potatoes and gravy, rolls that we painted in enough butter to stop a horse's heart, and Coke—gallons of Coke.

No matter how much we ate, our stomachs did not feel full, so our brains said to eat more. I must have eaten five plates of food before finally stopping. The extreme hunger worried me because we had just finished Benning phase. If we were this hungry now, what would it feel like after mountain phase? I wondered.

When we finally walked out the front door, I saw several rangers in the hedges throwing up everything they had just eaten. All that food, the satisfaction of filling their empty bellies, at once gone. *Their bodies did not even get to use the food. I think I'd go back in and get a refill*, I thought to myself. Fortunately, I held everything down. I was as full as a tick, but not sick. From Ryan's, I went to Ranger Joe's and bought a new pair of boots.

Eight hours have never passed so quickly. When we returned to Camp Rogers, the desert phase cadre was already there waiting for us. It was time to move on to desert phase.

Benning had begun with an intense week of hazing. I had prepared myself physically, so I did not experience any surprises. There was nothing I did not expect, other than the intensity, and often mean nature, of the hazing. Ranger Assessment Phase certainly weeded out those who were not mentally prepared to submit and suffer. At Camp Darby, we transitioned to business—patrolling—and got our first real taste of winter weather. I was tired, and I was hungry, but it was only the beginning.

I did not know what to expect during desert phase, but I felt a strong sense of progress. For those who would make it straight through the course without recycling a phase, they were a quarter of the way through. That felt good. Still, mountains loomed in the future. Because I knew so much about mountain phase, I had a sense of nervous anticipation that bordered on fear. That's where long-term hunger and fatigue would join forces with Mother Nature in terrain that would break many of us. That's where the test would truly begin.

DESERT PHASE

7th Ranger Training Battalion
McGregor Base Camp, New Mexico

McGregor Base Camp

November 1992

There were not enough air force planes available for the entire class to jump into desert phase, so the RIs selected a couple of squads from each company to conduct the airborne operation. My squad was not chosen, so I flew on a chartered plane to Biggs Army Airfield, El Paso, Texas. Most of us slept the entire way, but in the moments before sleep took me, it occurred to me just how much the dialogue inside my head had increased.

In an environment as demanding as ranger school, I found that I carried on conversations with myself more and more. I participated in an internal discourse that only ceased when I was asleep, and I said things to myself that I would not share with others. I acknowledged my weaknesses yet reminded myself that this too would end someday. I pitied myself just a little and was ashamed, so I scolded myself. I reminded myself that in the end, I'd earn the right to wear a ranger tab for the rest of my career. *So, stay focused and suck it up!* I cheered myself on and cautioned myself to avoid injury. I was my own best cheerleader, minus the miniskirt, makeup, and saddle oxfords. In such extreme hardship, I was learning lessons about myself that would serve me well for the rest of my life.

Each of us loved to jump out of airplanes, but the charter flight was a blessing. It was an opportunity to get some sleep and avoid injury, as many injuries occur while jumping. The airborne operation would be a night jump into Grange Drop Zone. Lieutenant General David E. Grange Jr. was an inaugural member of the Ranger Hall of Fame. With three silver stars, an air medal, a bronze star, and an army commendation, all with "V" devices for valor in combat, and a purple heart to boot, General Grange was a war hero. His son, Major General David L. Grange was an alumnus of my alma mater, North Georgia College, so part of me really wanted to jump just to be able to say that I had conducted an airborne

operation into Grange DZ. That's what I was thinking as I comfortably drifted off to sleep on the chartered plane.

I woke with a jolt when the wheels touched down in El Paso. We filed off the plane and stood on the tarmac while our gear was offloaded. Once we secured our equipment, we boarded busses. It took just over an hour to drive to McGregor Base Camp. Once we arrived, the RIs put us in the barracks, where we claimed a bunk and unpacked our gear. It wasn't long before those who had jumped began to arrive. By that time, it was well past midnight, and most of us were already asleep. That did not deter the new arrivals from turning the lights on to get situated in a bunk.

I awoke to the sundried landscape of the desert southwest. It was the farthest west I'd ever been, and I was struck by the unique beauty of the high desert. For as far as I could see to the south, the desert ran flat with mounds populating the desert's surface like pimples on smooth skin. On top of the mounds were either mesquite trees or yucca plants. To the east, a wall of rock rose several thousand feet, then ran flat. It was pancake flat on top—a plateau. To the west, a long mountain range stretched north to south—the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge. And to the north, over one hundred miles away, past White Sands Missile Range, Holloman Air Force Base, Alamogordo, and Cloud Croft, sat the snowcapped peak Sierra Blanca—white mountain. At 11,981 feet, it was the highest mountain I'd ever seen at that point in my life.

We were in the Tularosa Valley, which runs north-south. Immediately, I began thinking about navigation. We would not have creeks and valleys and ridges to use for terrain association, but it would be easy to quickly discern cardinal directions. To the north, Sierra Blanca was unmistakable. The cities of El Paso and Juarez, Mexico were south, and while they could not be seen during the day, they would glow with light at night. The plateau sat atop a three-thousand-foot wall to the east, and the jagged mountains of the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge were prominent to the west. I would not lose track of cardinal directions. Distance would be the challenge. Because we could see so far, everything seemed to look closer than it really was. Pace count would be key.

The first day consisted of an orientation to desert operations. The RIs taught classes on patrolling in a desert environment, as well as wildlife we were likely

to encounter, which was nothing more than coyotes and rattlesnakes. The only thing that would have concerned me was the possibility of rattlesnakes, but it was far too cold for snakes in November.

That afternoon, an RI marched us down a dusty dirt road. He was a staff sergeant but looked to be no more than twenty-four years old. He was small, maybe five feet seven inches and a buck fifty, soaking wet. He began to teach a class on desert vegetation, critters we might encounter, and cold-weather injuries.

“In cold weather, we tend not to drink because we don’t sweat or feel thirsty,” he said. “You must force yourselves to drink water out here.” He pointed to the desert around us.

“You are going to walk this desert day and night. You will lose fluids, so you will become dehydrated if you don’t drink. So, drink water, rangers.

“Now, because you rangers are going to do what you are told and drink water, you will have to pee, but it’s cold, and you won’t want to get your little tallywhackers cold. That’s the wrong answer, rangers.

“If you feel the need to pee, you need to pee. Because you are cold, your body will reduce blood flow to the extremities, thus causing your hands and feet to get cold first. It takes energy and heat to hold pee in your bladder, so get rid of it. Do not lie in the patrol base, shivering and holding your pee. You’ll only make it worse.”

We were standing in the road with no coats on, and it began to rain, then sleet. The RI behaved as if he did not even notice it. He was wearing a Gore-Tex jacket, a fact that was not lost on any of us.

“Hyperthermia will kill your ass, rangers. We don’t need no rangers dying of cold-weather injuries, so you will stay hydrated, you will pee when you need to pee, and you will not get sweaty by walking with your snivel gear on. Do you understand?” the RI said.

There were several inaudible “roger, sergeants” in the formation, but most did not answer him.

Rather quickly, our BDUs were soaked. Slowly, our shivering turned to shaking. Men balled their fists up and squeezed them, trying to generate a tiny bit of heat through isometrics. It didn’t take long until we were uncontrollably

shaking, as we struggled to remain relatively still in formation and not move around too much.

How ironic, I thought to myself. *Here we stand in the rain and sleet, soaking wet, with an RI teaching us about cold-weather injuries. I suppose this is the part where we kill one ranger to validate his class to the rest of us.*

I wondered if this was some power trip for the sergeant. It seemed somewhat out of place for the desert RIs. From the time they had picked us up at Fort Benning, the tone had changed. They were stern and direct but more relaxed than their Benning counterparts. I had not heard one of them yell or drop a student for push-ups. Yet, there we stood being punished by Mother Nature for no apparent reason.

Out of my peripheral vision, I saw a pickup truck approaching. It stopped just short of our formation and a sergeant first class stepped out. He motioned to the RI teaching the class. “At ease, rangers,” the RI said, then hustled to the truck.

I watched out of the corner of my eye as the two RIs spoke. It appeared to be a rather stern one-way conversation. When the staff sergeant returned, he ordered our student first sergeant, Dewayne Stephens, to march us back to the barracks. Common sense had prevailed after all.

The following day, we began patrolling. At Fort Benning, we had only patrolled as squads. We would patrol as platoons of forty or more rangers in the desert. I had been told that the desert is perfect for transitioning to platoon patrolling because you can see everyone, which turned out to be true.

The first thing the RIs taught us were the considerations for patrolling in desert environments. Because the desert is flat and wide open, the distance between us as we patrolled must increase. We dispersed so that if we were attacked, not everyone would be killed or wounded due to being bunched up close together. Just like at Fort Benning, we initially patrolled with the RIs teaching us as we went along.

I saw jackrabbits, hundreds and hundreds of jackrabbits. They were huge when compared to the cottontails I’d grown up with in the southeast. In the desert, small rabbits were knee-high, some waist-high, with ears half a foot long. Every time I walked around a mesquite mound, I’d jump a rabbit, and they didn’t run far before they stopped. All I could think about was hunting them with

my bow and arrow when I got to Fort Bliss. What fun that would be.

On the fourth day, the RIs assigned leadership positions and issued our first operations order. It was time to begin. They chose a special forces captain in our platoon as the patrol leader for bay planning. He selected a few other rangers to help with the planning. I had not really met him, so I was not chosen to assist. I wandered outside and saw another ranger in my platoon that I'd briefly met at Fort Benning. His name was John Uharriet, and he had been one of the four squad leaders that Staff Sergeant Justice forced to low crawl all night as he tried to get one of them to quit.

John was standing by the butt can in the designated smoking area. I decided to go talk to him. He took a long draw on a cigarette. Then, as he exhaled, he looked at me and asked, "Where you going after ranger school, Jimmy?"

I looked south at the horizon and pointed. "Going right down there," I said. "Fort Bliss, Texas."

His face instantly lit up. "Get out of here," he said. "What unit?"

"3d Armored Cavalry Regiment."

"Well, I'll be dang. Me too!"

"No way," I said.

"Yep. I'm a military intelligence officer. I'll be working in the regimental S2 shop."

"I'm a Kiowa pilot. I'll be going to 4th Squadron," I said.

"Longknife squadron," John said.

"Yep. When are you going to report?" I asked.

"Well, if I make it out of here in January, I'll go straight there. If I get recycled, it'll be later," he said with a chuckle.

"Yeah, same here. I'm packed and ready to roll west. I'll go as soon as I graduate."

"My family is already in El Paso. I moved them there before I reported to ranger school," he said.

"Cool. Say, where are you from, John?"

"Kaysville, Utah," he said.

"Utah. You a Mormon?" I asked.

John lowered his head, smiled, and nodded. "You caught me red-handed. A

weak man," he said, holding the cigarette up. "Please don't judge me too harshly for my vices. In such a condition as this, I'm finding it hard to part ways with the weaknesses of the natural man."

I was struck by his wit. I took him for a scrappy athlete that could handle himself. As time would prove, he was all that and much more. His poetic language was on par with his intellect.

"You never have to worry about me judging you," I said. "I struggle with my own vices. Just because you can't see mine, it doesn't mean they aren't there. We all have our crosses to bear, so far be it from me to cast the first stone."

"We're all a work in progress, brother," John said.

"Yeah, I subscribe to the whole 'he who lives in a glass house should not cast the first stone' thing, you know," I said.

"Wait, you're not a Latter-Day Saint, are you?" he asked.

"Card-carrying member," I said, now smiling.

"Now, what are the chances of that?" he said. "You and me in the same platoon, going to the same duty assignment after ranger school. And we'll be going to church together. I guess we'd do well to look out for one another."

"Maybe that's why the good Lord put us together," I said.

John then slapped me on the back and said, "I guess so, brother. I guess you're right."

John wore what we call TEDs (tactical eye devices). The lenses were encased in black plastic frames, but the rest of the glasses were made completely of rubber. They reminded me of racquetball glasses. The rubber frame is a strap that wraps around your head so they don't fall off. Soldiers call them BCDs (birth control glasses) because no one could breed wearing a pair of those ugly things.

John also wore significant scars on his arm, side, and hip—a reminder of how lucky he was to be alive. Growing up in Kaysville, he and his twin brother James often rode motorbikes on the trails under high-tension power lines. The area was off-limits, so the police used to check it quite often, but John, his brother James, and their buddies had learned how to get away before the law could catch them.

One of them would climb up on the tower that supported the power lines. From a platform sixty feet up, they could see the police coming from miles

away. That allowed the lookout to warn the others with enough time for a getaway on the bike before the police could get to them.

One day, John was up on the platform, and his brother James was on a platform about ten feet below him as their friends rode bikes. John was wearing a Levi's jean jacket. As he stood on the platform, electricity from the wires above reached out, grabbed him, and sucked him off the platform. Through the buttons on his jacket, the electricity literally pulled him to the wire and electrocuted him, but then cast him away, and he began falling. Through divine intervention—that's the only way to describe it—James caught John's unconscious body as it fell to what would have been certain death.

Over the months that followed, John underwent multiple skin grafts, but he survived. To catch a grown man falling is beyond improbable. John was not meant to die that day, and I, for one, am grateful.

Both John and James enlisted in the army. John had achieved the rank of staff sergeant before he was commissioned as a lieutenant. Having decided to pursue a degree, John returned to Utah, where he served in the Utah National Guard while attending the University of Utah—Running Utes.

After receiving his second lieutenant bars, he reported to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, for the military intelligence officer basic course. Now, we were both seeking to earn our tabs.

"Kaysville, that's north of Salt Lake, right?" I asked.

"Yep, just south of Ogden," John replied.

"That's some pretty country. I love the Rocky Mountains," I said.

"The Rocky Mountains is the marrow of the world," John said, and I recognized the quote from *Jeremiah Johnson*.

"One of the finest movies ever made," I said. "'I ain't never seen 'em, but my common sense tells me the Andes is foothills, and the Alps is for children to climb.'"

"Del Gue," John said. "What a character."

"Yes, he was," I said.

"Say, that reminds me of a joke," John began. "This ole boy wanted to go out west and become a mountain man, so he sold everything he owned and went into the Rocky Mountains. But when he got there, they told him the only way he

could become a mountain man was to pass a test.

“He asked what the test was. They told him he had to go into three teepees. In one, there was a gallon of moonshine that he had to drink. In another, there was a nymphomaniac woman he had to tame, and in the third was a bear with a bad tooth he had to pull.

“He told them he aimed to be a mountain man, so he reckoned he’d give it a try.

“They took him over to the teepees, and he entered the first one. Sitting on the ground in the middle of the floor was a gallon of moonshine. It took him about ten minutes, but he got it all down.

“He came out with bloodshot eyes and shook his head. Then he went into the next tent.

“It sounded like an explosion inside. They heard the most awful screaming, and scratching, and yelling, and roaring they’d ever heard.

“Finally, the old boy stumbled out of the teepee breathless. He wasn’t wearing no pants, his shirt was shredded, and he was bleeding all over. He looked at them and said, ‘Okay, now where’s that woman with a bad tooth?’”

I bent over laughing.

“Let’s swap information later, so we can link up when we get to El Paso. We might have to make a trip to that mountain,” I said, pointing north at Sierra Blanca.

“Absolutely,” he said, then flicked the cigarette butt into the can. “Now, we’d better get back in here and see what we can do to help out.”

The first mission in desert phase was a raid. As previously mentioned, the hardest part of patrolling in the desert is navigating. Due to the lack of terrain features to orient on, the best option is to use lights on the horizon or a prominent peak on a mountain in the far distance. The point/compass man really has to stay on his game, or the patrol will never find the objective.

Because lights look closer than they really are in the desert, the RIs wanted to make sure that a lost ranger didn’t decide to try to walk to town for help.

“If you become lost, rangers, immediately stop,” they told us every single morning. “Fire three evenly spaced blanks into the air. Bang! Bang! Bang!” emphasizing the shots. “Wait for three rounds to answer you. If you don’t get a

reply, then every few minutes, fire three more rounds until you get an answer. Eventually, we'll find you, but DO NOT start walking."

It seemed clear to me that they had lost rangers more than once.

On that first mission, we walked throughout the night, and as might be expected, we had to stop and backtrack several times to find the objective. Our actions on the objective went okay, but the movement there had been rough. Because we were so spread out as we walked, we got separated several times. Clearly, the RIs anticipated this because they stopped us each time.

One of the RIs then went to the patrol leader and asked if he had accountability of everyone. That was a clear indicator that he did not, so we sent up a headcount. It was wrong, so we began trying to find our fellow rangers. Once we found him, or them, we resumed the patrol. No more than thirty minutes later, we repeated the process. This happened multiple times.

After we finished the raid and got everyone back to the ORP, the RIs changed out the leadership roles and gave us a grid to the location where our patrol base would be. It was about two kilometers away.

Even with leather gloves, the cold steel of the M16 caused my hands to ache. They were dry, and the tips of my thumbs and fingers were beginning to crack, but they were anything but numb. They hurt! I tried to cradle the M16 in my arms to give my hands relief. I even blew my breath into my gloves to try and warm my fingers, but nothing seemed to help. We arrived at the patrol base around 0300 in the morning.

By the time a patrol arrives at the patrol base, the only thing rangers want to do is sleep. Everyone is tired, and by this point in ranger school, chronic fatigue is beginning to set in. Yet, other priorities must be attended to before sleeping, and it takes discipline and leadership to get them done. The first priority of work is to establish security. This is important because we are in bad guy country and could be attacked. If attacked, we must be prepared to fight or escape. Next, rangers must sketch out range cards. These cards ensure that each position has overlapping fields of fire. If there is any dead space (areas where you can't shoot due to the terrain), it's accounted for with grenade launchers, claymore mines, or some other means.

The third priority of work is weapons and equipment maintenance. Having just

assaulted an objective, every weapon had been shot, so they must be cleaned to ensure they remain in good working order. The next priority of work is water resupply. If the patrol is near a creek, pond, or river, several rangers collect everyone's canteens, put them in their rucksack, and stealthily move to the water source to fill them. In the desert, we were given locations for water caches.

The fifth priority is to conduct pre-combat checks and inspections. If the patrol suddenly had to move or fight, everyone must be ready. Readiness is a leader's responsibility. Following that, the next priority is sanitation. Even though rangers at this point in training only defecate every four or five days, inevitably, a ranger will have to go. A slit trench or small ditch is dug in the middle of the patrol base for such business.

If a ranger has to use the slit trench, they crawl back to the trench, drop their trousers, and do their business. It's one of the most uncomfortable things I've ever done in my life. I'm not a shy ranger, but there is just something unnatural about doing this bit of business in front of others.

The next priority is personal hygiene. It's easy to skip brushing your teeth, and no one wants to shave dry when it's in the single digits outside. Despite the discomfort and extreme conditions, leaders must ensure that discipline prevails. Personal hygiene also includes a foot check by the RIs. Rangers must change their socks and powder their feet regularly. Again, no one wants to remove their boots and socks and await the inspection in single-digit temps, but it must be done. Blisters are common and must be treated, but more importantly, we had to keep a lookout for trench foot, frostnip, and frostbite.

Due to the body's physiological response in cold weather, the hands and feet are the first things to lose heat. Our bodies want to keep a level of homeostasis, but they certainly have an order of precedence in terms of what they try to keep warm. The skin is our largest organ, the one that gets the most blood, but when our core begins to get cold, the body restricts capillaries in the skin to concentrate more blood in the core. Thus, blood flow to the hands and feet is restricted, and they get colder.

The RIs had a sadistic way of dealing with those who complained about their feet being cold. If a student complained that his feet were cold, the RI would make his ranger buddy lift his shirt. The complaining ranger would then place

his cold bare feet on his ranger buddy's belly. That ranger would then ball up and hug his ranger buddy's feet. The heat transfer from one ranger's belly to the other's feet certainly warms the dogs, but it is miserable for the ranger hugging his buddy's feet. It didn't take long for peer pressure to ensure that no one complained of cold feet.

Dehydration was also a concern. As we had learned early on, when we're cold, we tend to not drink as much water, so we become dehydrated. When we are properly hydrated, our blood volume is full, which helps keep the body warmer. Good leaders constantly force hydration and check to ensure that their rangers are performing proper hygiene. If a ranger becomes a casualty, it increases the risk to everyone. If the casualty is caused by a lack of discipline, then leadership failed.

After security was established, range cards drawn, weapons cleaned, water resupplied, pre-combat inspections completed, a slit trench dug, and personal hygiene completed, it was finally time to eat. While this priority may sound like something we'd be eager to do, it really wasn't. We ate our meals as we moved. When we packed our rucks, we broke the MREs down, so we could put the small packages of food in our pockets and, at opportune times, nibble as we went.

What we truly looked forward to was the final priority of work: rest. Because we had to maintain security, we rotated sleeping. The best we could hope for was 50 percent security, which meant that one ranger could sleep while his ranger buddy pulled security.

When men are completely broken down, sleep-deprived, starved, and exhausted, thirty minutes of sleep seems like three hours. If we were lucky enough to sleep three hours, it felt like eight. The limiting factor was how long a ranger could remain awake while his buddy slept. Thirty minutes was difficult. Ideally, one ranger would sleep thirty minutes while his ranger buddy pulled security, but sometimes, we had to cut that to fifteen minutes.

This is why ranger school is the most challenging leadership course in the world. To get men to exercise the discipline required to follow you when they are in the most miserable state of being they have ever experienced is not easy. Every instinct, every fiber in their body, is telling them to eat, sleep, and get

warm. Yet their peer, who is being graded, asks them to stay awake, pull security, walk point, build a fighting position, don't eat until their weapon is clean and they've brushed their teeth and dragged a razor across their cold, dirty face. Leading men in such conditions is extremely challenging. Choosing the hard right over the easy wrong in such a condition takes discipline and self-control, and that's why ranger school is the closest replication of combat that exists. In combat, everyone would need to depend on one another to stay alive.

It is through this process that ranger school teaches us about human performance and character under stress. For example, every soldier is academically taught about intestinal fortitude. Ranger school provides an opportunity to experience it. The last stanza of the ranger creed states, "Readily will I display the intestinal fortitude required to fight on to the ranger objective and complete the mission, though I be the lone survivor."

Ranger school puts us in a unique situation, a condition, in which we can truly see if we have the courage and endurance to press on despite fatigue, hunger, and harsh meteorological conditions. We find out truly what we are made of deep down inside. Some men wither under the extreme conditions. Others learn that they can dig deep and perform despite the misery.

I had read a book in college that made a profound impact on me. That book was probably the single most influential motivator, for me personally, during ranger school. I drew from it almost daily for strength. That book was Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. I dare not compare ranger school to German concentration camps during World War II, but I certainly drew from Dr. Frankl's experiences as I faced my own challenges. No matter how miserable I felt, I knew it wasn't as bad as what Frankl and his fellow prisoners had experienced. What I didn't realize at the time was that through the hardship of ranger school, I was creating my own experiences that I would later look back on and say, "It's not as bad as ranger school."

What kind of person would I be? That's the question I pondered, and the resounding answer for me was that I would be a man I could live with for the rest of my life. Make decisions you can live with. Now, decide to dig deep and rise above all this.

So, I did.

After the foot check, the RIs let us put our polypropylene long underwear on. Still, I shivered most of the night. At one point, I was so cold I thought for sure I was getting hypothermia. My ranger buddy and I lay beside one another, staring into the darkness and trembling. Soon, I noticed that he was touching me. His arm and leg lightly pressed against mine. I felt instant warmth. In reality, it was minuscule, but having been so cold, it felt like I was lying next to an oven. I inched closer, pressing against him.

Next thing you know, I was full-on spooning with him. It's quite amazing how effective heat transfer is. When you are bone cold and lying on the ground, just touching shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh, you will immediately feel the heat transfer from body to body.

No one asks their ranger buddy if he wants to spoon. That would be quite weird and would most likely prompt a punch in the face. Both rangers are freezing, and both know that if they touch shoulders and legs, they will instantly feel the warmth. So, they just lay close enough to touch. As temperatures drop, the rangers get colder, so they try and get closer, warmer. The next thing you know, one ranger throws a leg over his ranger buddy's leg, and soon it's a full-on spoon. It just kind of happens.

And the morning sun, what a welcomed sight. It was my turn to pull security at first light. I watched with eager anticipation as the sky, painfully slow, turned a dark, deep blue, almost purple, then pink. I prayed for sunup that morning, knowing that five degrees in direct sunlight would feel like a sauna. And it did.

Eventually, with the sun shining on my back, my spirits rose in tandem. "Ole BOB finally arrived," a ranger lying near me whispered. He too had been looking forward to it.

But I'd never heard that expression. "What's Bob mean?" I asked.

"Big Orange Ball," he said and nodded to the sun. I'd heard the sun called the heat tab in the sky, but never BOB.

Not long after sunrise, we saw a dust cloud on the horizon—trucks. It was time for the RI changeover. The RIs worked in twenty-four-hour shifts. They changed out each morning just after daylight, and as soon as the new RIs took over, they rotated our student leadership positions as well.

The first order of business was for the outgoing RIs to debrief the students

who had been in leadership positions. They took each student aside one by one and told them what they'd done well and what they needed to improve. Once everyone had been debriefed, the outgoing RIs loaded up in the trucks and departed.

The new RIs then assigned new leadership positions and had us recite the ranger creed. At Fort Benning, we had to recite the creed to eat. In desert phase, they would call out the new leadership positions, and as a ranger's name was called, he moved to the front of the platoon and faced his fellow rangers. Once all the leaders were selected, they would recite the ranger creed, with each one reciting a stanza. If they messed it up, or could not remember the words, the RIs gave them a few minutes of attention.

"Blackmon!"

"Yes, sergeant," I replied.

"Squad leader."

I had been assigned my first patrol. I moved to the front, faced my fellow rangers, and took a knee. The patrol leader was first in line, then the platoon sergeant. I was next. I'd have to recite the third stanza of the ranger creed. Silently, I began reciting it in my head. *Never shall I fail my comrades. I will always keep myself mentally alert, physically strong, and morally straight, and I will shoulder more than my share of the task whatever it may be, one hundred percent and then some.*

We used the acronym RANGER to remember the creed. The first letter of each stanza spells the word ranger. The patrol leader began.

> **R***ecognizing that I volunteered as a Ranger, fully knowing the hazards of my chosen profession, I will always endeavor to uphold the prestige, honor, and high esprit de corps of the Rangers.*
>
> **A***cknowledging the fact that a Ranger is a more elite Soldier who arrives at the cutting edge of battle by land, sea, or air, I accept the fact that as a Ranger my country expects me to move further, faster, and fight harder than any other Soldier.*
>
> **N***ever shall I fail my comrades. I will always keep myself mentally alert, physically strong, and morally straight, and I will shoulder more than my share of the task whatever it may be, one hundred percent and then some.*

G*allantly will I show the world that I am a specially selected and well-trained Soldier. My courtesy to superior officers, neatness of dress and care of equipment shall set the example for others to follow.*

E*nergetically will I meet the enemies of my country. I shall defeat them on the field of battle for I am better trained and will fight with all my might. Surrender is not a Ranger word. I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy and under no circumstances will I ever embarrass my country.*

R*eadily will I display the intestinal fortitude required to fight on to the Ranger objective and complete the mission though I be the lone survivor.*

Rangers lead the way!

The ranger creed is not a poem; it's a promise. At its core, it is a commitment that a ranger recognizes what he has volunteered for. He commits to keep himself mentally, physically, and morally prepared. He will live up to his commitments to never leave a fallen comrade behind, and should he be the lone survivor, he will complete the mission. The creed is not taken lightly.

I was once in the presence of an old ranger when an unkempt and overweight ranger walked by. The old ranger standing beside me nodded at the guy and said, "Nothing worse than a ranger that allows himself to get out of shape."

It struck me that it wasn't so much that this man was not as fit as he should be, but rather that he was a ranger. He wore the tab on his left shoulder, and he had failed to keep his commitments. He had made the promise, yet he had not kept it. I promised myself that day that if I earned the tab, I'd never be "that guy."

During the RI changeover, we were allowed to make a canteen cup of coffee, and those who smoked could smoke. Each MRE had a small packet of Taster's Choice instant coffee inside. We used a Vietnam-era heat tab to heat a canteen cup of water, then mixed the instant coffee in. The shot of caffeine was potent to a broken-down ranger, but perhaps the best part was the warmth of the liquid that could be felt flowing from lips to belly.

In the early 1990s, the army made an effort to improve MREs, which due to their bland flavor, had earned the name Meals Rejected by the Enemy. To this end, the main-course meal choices improved, and a Tootsie Roll and a tiny bottle of Tabasco sauce were added to the accessory packet. Perhaps most importantly,

USA MRE Coffee Instant Type 2 was replaced by a packet of Taster's Choice instant coffee. Morale instantly improved.

"This is the best part of my day," Doc Black said, now recovered from his broken nose. "I look forward to this moment more than anything. It's almost like I'm not here for a few minutes," he said, then leaned back against his rucksack and crossed his outstretched feet, cup of coffee in hand.

Morale was generally the highest right after the RI changeover. It was somewhat of a renewal, a rebirth at sunrise. Our first priority was to improve our fighting positions. Having set up the patrol base during darkness, we could always find room for improvement. Essentially, we'd work throughout the day in the patrol base. At some point, the RIs would issue the order for our next mission. We would conduct troop-leading procedures to plan that mission, rehearse it, and once it was dark, we'd depart the patrol base for the objective. "The one thing that is certain in ranger school," Fred Wintrich had told me. "When the sun goes down, you'll be walking. And when the sun comes back up, you'll still be walking."

Since daylight, the RIs had left us alone. They were somewhere out in the dunes, talking and killing time. I had to pee, so I told my ranger buddy where I was going, then crouched down and moved just outside the perimeter. I was supposed to use the slit trench, but I figured no one would see. I took a knee and began unbuttoning my trousers, but my thumb caught on my fly, and the dry skin on the inside corner of my thumb, right along the nail line, split open wide. Blood began flowing from my thumb.

I managed to pee left-handed but gave up trying to button my fly. I returned to find my ranger buddy sound asleep. I crouched low and moved to the center of the patrol base, where I found the patrol leader.

"You know where the RI is?" I asked.

"He left half an hour ago or so. Why?"

I raised my bloody hand. "My thumb is dried out, and I split it open," I said.

The patrol leader pointed. "He went that way. Right over there somewhere."

"Thanks," I said, and I headed in the direction he pointed.

I found the two RIs sitting with their backs against their rucksacks, reading magazines. "What are you doing, ranger?" one of the RIs asked irritably. He was

clearly somewhat startled to see me outside the patrol base. They were in their safe zone, I suppose.

"I need some help, sergeant," I said. "You got any hundred-mile-an-hour tape?"

Hundred-mile-an-hour tape is olive drab masking tape, and it can be used to fix just about anything.

"What did you do, ranger?" he asked.

"My hands are dry and cracking. My thumb busted open, and I can't get it to stop bleeding. I just need to tape it up," I said.

"Here, let me see that hand," he said, reaching for me.

I walked closer and extended my hand. As he inspected my thumb, he asked, "Where is your ranger buddy? Why are you out here alone?"

Realizing he could give me a major minus for wandering outside the patrol base, especially without my ranger buddy, I thought quickly. I opted for humor. "Aww, he was sound asleep, sergeant. I didn't want to wake him," I said.

The RI's head snapped up, and his eyes met mine. A thin smile spread across his face, and he resumed inspecting my hand. He then began digging inside his ruck. He retrieved a roll of tape and a first-aid pouch. He then opened his canteen and washed the blood from my hand. "You sure as hell split that finger open," he said.

After washing the hand, he dabbed some iodine on the wound, then some Neosporin. Next, he put a small strip of gauze over it. Finally, he tore a piece of tape off and wrapped my thumb. "Tell me if I get it too tight," he said. "I don't want to cut the circulation off."

"Thanks, sergeant," I said when he'd finished. "That's fine."

"Get that dressing changed at the next RI changeover," he said.

"Roger that, sergeant," I said, and I returned to the patrol base.

When I lay back down beside my ranger buddy, his head was bobbing as he struggled to remain awake. "How'd it go?" he asked when he heard me lay down beside him on the ground.

"The RI bandaged me up," I said.

"Good. I figured they'd smoke you for wandering around outside the patrol base," he said.

“They did ask where my ranger buddy was,” I said.

“What did you tell them?”

“I told them you were sound asleep, and I didn’t want to bother you, so I came alone.”

“Nooo,” he said. “You didn’t tell them that, did you?”

“Yes, actually I did, but they thought I was trying to be funny,” I said, and sneezed.

Almost instantly, I felt something warm and wet drip on the back of my hand—blood. The dry air had initially produced bloody boogers, but now bloody noses were the norm. “This place sucks,” I told my ranger buddy as I fished through my ruck for MRE toilet paper.

“Dude, you’re having one hell of a morning,” he said. “First your finger and now your nose.”

I found the toilet paper, rolled it up, and inserted it in my nose as far as I could. About a half-inch stuck out. My ranger buddy looked at me, shook his head, and then looked into the distance. “‘Go to ranger school and become a man,’ my squad leader told me. But he didn’t mention the part about lying in a cold-ass desert with a tampon up your nose.”

I chuckled. “The things we’ll do,” I said. “The things we’ll do.”

Around 1500 hours, the RIs issued the order for our next mission. It was another raid. We spent the final two hours of daylight planning, briefing, and rehearsing—conducting troop-leading procedures. Just before dark, the RIs rotated the student leadership positions again. Because the positions changed during an ongoing mission, every ranger was wise to pay close attention to mission planning. A ranger never knew when they would be picked to take charge of the mission and complete it. Should this occur, you’d be wise to have paid attention to the concept of the operation. To help with this, the ranger who had been the patrol leader during troop-leading procedures was usually assigned the position of radio telephone operator (RTO).

The RTO remains at the patrol leader’s side throughout the mission. It’s nice to have the guy who planned the mission in your hip pocket as you take over the mission he had planned.

The RI that had observed me as squad leader came and found me. “Ranger

Blackmon," he said.

"Yes, sergeant."

"Come with me," he said, and I followed him just outside the perimeter to his rucksack. He sat down on the ground and pulled out a small notebook made of waterproof paper.

"How's that thumb?" he asked.

"Oh, it's good to go now, sergeant," I said.

"Well, don't forget to change the dressing. Don't want it to rot off," he said.

He then went through all the things I was supposed to have done as a squad leader. He went right down the list from the ranger handbook. Ranger Joe's is a popular store at Fort Benning. It's somewhat of a tourist store for rangers. They sell tee-shirts, sweatshirts, stickers, and every supply a ranger could want. They also sell laminated blank range cards and instructions taken directly from the Ranger Handbook. We called them cheat sheets, but there was nothing cheating about it. It was a smart and easy way to make sure you follow the ranger handbook. I had bought the sheets before I started ranger school and used them religiously, so I knew I had followed every detail precisely. It seemed to me that the RI had to search for things that I should have done better, so he nitpicked a bit about the range card, but I could tell that he was stretching. He did not tell me if I passed or failed, but I sensed that I had done well. I was relieved.

The RIs do not tell ranger students if they pass or fail because if they did, the students would know when they had passed enough patrols to earn their tab. It is called being tabbed out. If a ranger knows he is tabbed out, he will not necessarily have the same incentive to dig deep and help his fellow rangers also tab out. Not knowing for certain keeps students focused on doing their best and helping each other.

When he'd finished with me, the RI asked, "You got any questions, ranger?"

He'd been somewhat relaxed yet businesslike. I decided to press my luck, perhaps just for fun. When we'd sat down on the ground for the debrief, the first thing the RI had done was pack his lip with Copenhagen. So, I said, "Yes, sergeant, I do have one question."

"Go for it, ranger," he said.

"Do you want to share a dip of that Copenhagen?"

He was completely caught off guard. I reveled in his perplexed expression. “Ranger, you’d be wise to move your ass on back to the patrol base,” he said.

“Awe, I’m just kidding, sergeant. I don’t even dip. Just wanted to see if you’d share,” I said.

I could see the wheels turning. He was trying to decide how he wanted to respond. “Alright, ranger, we’re done here,” he said and closed his notebook.

With new leadership in place and the mission planned, we waited for darkness before we moved out. As the shadows grew long across the Tularosa Valley, I found myself anxiously anticipating darkness. While walking is laborious, it’s far better than lying in a patrol base, freezing. I liked the patrol base when the sun was shining, but at night, it was better to walk.

The movement that night took us close to the eastern foothills that lined the massive valley. Our movement went much smoother than the previous night—evidence that we were improving. We moved to a location about 800 meters from the objective and set up an ORP. The patrol leader took a few others with him and conducted a leader’s reconnaissance, then returned.

He called for all four squad leaders to join him in the middle of the perimeter. They lay on the ground with their heads close together, so the RTO could drape a poncho over them to conceal the light. Under the poncho, the patrol leader used a red lens flashlight to illuminate his map. He finalized the plan with his subordinate leaders by explaining to them the route we’d take to the objective, where the machine guns would be set up, and where those assaulting the objective would set up. They discussed the signal to open fire with the machine guns and the signal to shift fires. Finally, the patrol leader told them to go brief all of their squads.

One of the platoon sergeant’s primary responsibilities is to keep accountability of all the rangers. In the dark, it’s easy to lose people, especially if they have fallen asleep while taking a knee or laying in a fighting position. The platoon sergeant set up a choke point through which all rangers would pass on their way from the ORP to the objective. He took a knee at the choke point, and as we passed by, he physically touched our leg and counted each of us. He would remain at the ORP with our rucksacks, and when we returned from the assault, he would count us back in to ensure everyone was there.

The assault went well that night. The machine guns got in position while the assaulting force crept into their position. Once everyone was ready, the machine guns opened fire. Sometimes the guns jam, especially when they are dirty. But that night, blanks rang out across the desert floor and echoed through the foothills. After one minute of sustained fire, a green star cluster shot into the sky. That was the signal to shift fires. With that, the assault began.

We moved forward together, shooting at enemy fighters who scurried around the objective, as if trying to fall back and break contact with us. Playing along, they soon fell to the ground as if shot, and we assaulted through them. As we consolidated on the far side of the objective, I thought to myself, *this has gone fast. We should get some sleep tonight. We're going to get to the patrol base early.*

We redistributed ammunition on the objective, searched the enemy fighters for anything of value, then the patrol leaders gave the order to move back to the ORP. As I moved back through the choke point, I felt the platoon sergeant touch my leg and heard him counting softly. We went to our rucksacks and readied ourselves for movement to the patrol base, but it seemed to be taking a long time for the order to be given to move out. Soon, my squad leader crawled up beside me, "Blackmon, is that you?" he whispered.

"Roger."

"Okay."

"Hey, what's up?" I asked.

"Accountability. I think we're missing someone."

"You're kidding," I said, both surprised and disappointed.

"No. Not sure who, but we're missing somebody," he said as he crept to the next two rangers.

Several minutes passed and then an RI stepped into the middle of the ORP and turned on a white lens flashlight. The second we saw the white beam of light penetrating the night sky, we knew it was serious. The RIs remained tactical, just like the ranger students. If they wanted us to show them our route or explain the plan, they would lay down on the ground with us, have a poncho thrown over us, and look at the map with a red lens flashlight. When the white light came out, it was a big deal, and they were usually pissed off.

“Okay, rangers,” he said. “We’re missing someone. We are going to get online and walk from the ORP back to the objective.”

Everyone stood and stretched out online with about five feet between each person. Slowly, we walked back to the objective, searching for our fellow ranger student, but to no avail. Once we got to the objective, we turned around and walked back to the ORP. Still, he was nowhere to be found. The RIs were now talking aloud to one another, and they were clearly irritated. “Let’s go back, and this time let’s walk well past the objective,” one of them said to the others.

Once again, we slowly made our way to the objective. When we got there, an RI shouted, “Stay online and keep walking forward. We’re going to push through the objective.”

About ten meters past the objective, a student yelled, “Here he is. I found him.”

Ranger Heinmann from the 3rd Ranger Battalion was just waking up. He had been on one knee and had a magazine of ammunition in his hand when the other student found him. He had fallen asleep while changing a magazine in his weapon. Despite the noise of grenade simulators and machine guns firing, his body had literally turned the lights off—shut down. It was quite bizarre but not completely unexpected; I had noticed that he had been struggling to stay awake for days. Now awake, Ranger Heinmann rejoined the patrol with a major minus spot report.

We moved back to the ORP, retrieved our rucksacks, and made our way to the new patrol base. Once there, the RI instructed us to lay out and inventory all pyrotechnics and equipment. The patrol leader moved like a zombie. He was spent. He removed the inventory sheet from his rucksack and called out, “Red star cluster.”

No one moved. The patrol leader just stood there staring at the page. I looked around and realized that everyone was zoning out. They were sitting on or beside their rucks, but no one spoke or moved.

“Come on, guys. Who has a red star cluster?” I asked.

Nothing. No one seemed to even acknowledge that I’d said anything. I desperately wanted a few minutes of sleep, but I knew we would not get it until everything was inventoried and a requisition was placed for those things we had

expended on the mission. After each mission, we took inventory of what we had used during the assault. Then we used the PRC-77 radio to call back to our headquarters and requisition more ammo and pyro. Sometimes the RIs would bring the resupply with them at RI changeover, and sometimes they would give us grid coordinates where it would be cached. We would then have to find it to resupply.

I looked over at the RI. He sat on his rucksack, watching us. He had no intention of intervening. He simply observed and took notes. I stood and walked to the patrol leader. Taking the inventory sheet from his hands, I said, “I got it, man. I’ll do it. Just go sit on your ruck.”

“Thanks, man,” he mumbled, then joined the others who were in a circle sitting on their rucks. “Red star cluster!” I said loudly and began walking the circle up close to them. “Who has the red star cluster?” No one moved or said a word. They were not even looking inside their rucksacks to try and find it. I realized that we had reached a new low.

I began going man to man, searching their rucks myself. As I rifled through their rucks, I began finding pyro and equipment. When I found something, I simply tossed it into the middle of the circle. Another ranger was able to pull it together enough to help me, and together, we eventually found everything, noted the things we had expended during the mission, and requisitioned resupply.

Once we completed the requisition, the RIs told us to conduct patrol base operations, and they disappeared. It was almost daylight by then. My optimism for several hours of sleep was misplaced.

We didn’t finish our priorities of work until almost noon. By then, I was losing the battle with sleep. I lay in my fighting position on my belly. My hands were on my M16, which was laying across my rucksack. When pulling security, you lay at the ready—hands on your weapon and eyes scanning your sector. Only the ranger sleeping can curl up and rest. My eyes began uncontrollably closing, and my head began to bob. I fought sleep as hard as I could, but my head kept bobbing and bobbing, until finally, my head fell forward, causing my mouth to come crashing down on the carrying handle of my M16. My lips made contact first, then my teeth, which compressed my lips against the rifle with the weight of my head behind them. I snapped awake and tasted warm blood in my mouth.

I retrieved my canteen only to find that my water was frozen. The only way to keep water from freezing was to sleep with our canteen against our body. Our body temperature would usually keep the water from completely freezing. I spit blood, then rousted my ranger buddy and asked for his canteen. He let me wash my mouth out with his canteen. Eventually, my swollen lips stopped bleeding.

Each of us got less than two hours of sleep before it was time to plan the next mission. You could see the extreme fatigue in the heavy eyes of every ranger. About two hours before we were to begin movement to the objective, the RIs changed our leadership positions. The crew that had moved us to the patrol base was graded on that movement and our patrol base operations. Now a new crew would plan the mission, lead movement to the objective, and conduct the raid.

That afternoon, I received my first major leadership position—patrol leader. When serving as a squad leader, we were in charge of eight to ten rangers. The patrol leader led the entire platoon of approximately forty rangers. To earn the tab, each of us must pass a patrol as either a platoon sergeant or platoon leader. It was important to seize this opportunity because we didn't get as many opportunities at the major positions. This was my chance to check that block.

John Uharriet was assigned to be my RTO. He helped with planning, then we lay on the desert floor, waiting for darkness so we could begin movement to the objective.

We were facing south. The lights of El Paso and Juarez, Mexico illuminated the night sky fifty miles away. "Just think, Jimmy, we'll be right over there in a couple of months."

"I know. The weird part is that your family is right over there now. Just over there, and here you lay," I said.

"Yep, Pam and little Jackie are already there, sleeping under those city lights right now. And my wife is pregnant with our son."

"Really? When is she due?"

"Any day now, actually."

"You're kidding! You got her pregnant, then left her to go to ranger school," I said.

"Yep. In fact, he should be born this week," John said. "That's the life of a soldier."

We lay in silence for several minutes, staring at the horizon. The only sound that broke the silence was the occasional airplane approaching El Paso International. “Look at all those stars,” I whispered.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he said. “Must be a million of them.”

“Why is it you can see so many more stars out here in the desert?” I asked. “I don’t ever remember seeing that many back home.”

“They call it light pollution. When you’re in the city, the light inhibits our ability to see them. They are always there; we just can’t see them. Way out here, there is no artificial light, just the stars and the moon. Clear as a whistle,” he said, and we stared in silence for what seemed like an hour.

“Well, I’d better go check on everyone. Make sure they are awake and ready to go,” I said, getting up. “I’ll be back in a few.”

I crouched to reduce my signature among the mesquite mounds as I moved across the desert floor. Moving from one fighting position to the next, I checked on everyone in my platoon to make sure they were awake and that everyone was doing okay. As I crawled up to one position, I discovered a ranger eating an MRE. He had finished the main course and had then used his knife to cut the foil wrapper completely open. When I approached him, he was licking the wrapper clean. It was Ranger Jones, the vegetarian I’d swapped potatoes with at Fort Benning.

“I thought you was a vegetarian, Jones,” I said.

“Yeah. I am, but it’ll have to wait until ranger school is over,” he whispered.

“I figured as much,” I said and moved on.

Every man did what they had to do to cope. Rangers who did not smoke or chew normally did so at ranger school to try and stay awake. Grown men spooned with each other to keep from freezing to death, and a vegetarian ate meat to keep from starving. The struggle against the natural urge to bundle up in every piece of clothing we carried in our rucks was very real. And as it turned out, it was more than some could overcome.

The RIs had repeatedly told us not to try and patrol with our polypropylene underwear on.

“I know you rangers want to keep your snivel gear on,” the RI said. That’s what they call cold-weather gear—snivel gear. “But if you walk with it on,

you'll end up sweating, and then when we stop, you'll be wet. You get wet and stop out here, and you'll get hypothermia and die. I don't need no dead ranger on my watch, so I'd better not catch you trying to walk with your shit on."

We walked cold. Despite leather gloves, our hands ached from the cold steel of our rifles. Our noses ran constantly, and the only thing that provided some relief to our freezing feet was walking.

That night, as we moved out, an RI took a knee behind a mesquite mound. As we passed by, he reached out and pinched our trousers and leg. He was checking to see if we were wearing our polypropylene. I jumped when I unexpectedly felt him pinch my leg, then realized what he was doing.

Not a minute later, "Stop! Stop the patrol, rangers," the RI called out, and I was left to assume that I had just failed my patrol.

Everyone immediately took a knee. "You don't know how to follow instructions do you, ranger?" the RI asked the guilty ranger.

The student stood speechless, staring at the ground, absent an excuse. "Get that shit off right now," he said, and the student began unbuttoning his trousers.

As the student removed his polypropylene bottoms, the RI used his flashlight to write out a major minus spot report. I half expected the ranger to be kicked out as a safety violation, but the RI used him to make a point. "Rangers, you'd be wise to do what the fuck I say," he said, handing the student his major minus. "Now, let's move out."

Movement to the objective was a nightmare that night. Every time we stopped the patrol and took a knee, we'd have a break in contact. A break in contact is when a separation forms in the formation, and you no longer know where everyone is.

We were so tired that when we stopped to take a knee, several rangers instantly fell asleep. When we started moving again, they would not get up and follow, so we'd walk off and leave them, causing the break in contact. Each time I realized that we were missing a portion of the patrol, I stopped and sent someone back to get the rangers still on a knee. We moved like a yo-yo all the way to the objective. No matter how well actions on the objective went, I was sure I'd fail the patrol.

As if things were not bad enough, that night, several of us began hallucinating.

A fellow ranger told me that he saw apples and pears hanging on the limbs of a tree. He stood there in the desert, like a mime, trying to pick fruit from a tree that wasn't there.

I was walking along and thought I saw a black shelf in front of me. On some level of consciousness, it didn't make sense to me. I was in the desert, yet I could see a shelf, so to avoid hitting my head, I bent at the waist to go under it. As soon as I passed under it, I stood back up only to find another shelf in front of me. Then suddenly, the stars began shooting at me like white lasers from the sky. I dodged and ducked over and over to avoid being hit. It made no sense, yet I saw it and experienced it.

I saw a ranger in front of me turn forty-five degrees from our direction of travel and walk off into the desert. I grabbed him by his rucksack and pulled him back. "Wake up, man," I whispered.

"Thanks, dude." He was sleepwalking.

Eventually, miraculously, we made it to the ORP. I took the squad leaders forward to conduct reconnaissance. We found four enemy fighters sitting around a roaring campfire. It was easy to see them. In the pitch-dark desert, the glow of the roaring fire could be seen for miles. I gave instructions to the squad leaders, and we moved back to the ORP.

The platoon sergeant counted us through the chokepoint as we moved forward to the objective. Despite the extreme fatigue, the assault went relatively well. It seemed that once the shooting started, we were always able to rally for the assault. It was lying on the ground in the patrol base or ORP that was difficult. We made our way back to the ORP, where the platoon sergeant counted us through, and once again, we were missing a ranger.

But this time, it would be more serious.

We went through the process of retracing our steps to and from the objective several times. A couple of hours passed, and I heard an RI talking on his radio. They had halted all training. All three companies, the entire ranger school class, were to converge where we last saw Ranger Lewis and begin searching.

Once everyone was there, we stretched out over a mile of desert and began walking. "Rangers, every time your left foot hits the ground, I want you to yell out, 'Lewis.'"

For the next two hours, I shouted “Lewis” every time my left foot hit the ground. The ranger school cadre called my future boss, Lieutenant Colonel Gratton O. Sealock, also a ranger. He commanded 4th Squadron, 3d US Cavalry. He launched a team of OH-58 Kiowa helicopters. Pilots with night vision goggles joined the search for Lewis.

Just before daylight, the RIs pulled us all together. “Rangers, once it gets light out, we are going to make another long pass, but I need you to move slowly and look closely. It’s five degrees Fahrenheit right now, rangers. At this point, he may not be alive, so look carefully.”

Once again, we walked over a mile, but we did not find Lewis. The RIs huddled us up. “Rangers, gather what wood you can find and make a warming fire.”

I assumed we would be there for a while because the rule was that if the RIs stopped the patrol for over an hour and the temperature was below twenty-eight degrees, then they had to allow us to build a warming fire. They could walk us all night long if they wanted to, but if we stopped for over an hour, they had to let us build a fire.

We gathered dry yucca plants and mesquite to build a fire. Once it was burning, we huddled up as close to the flames as possible. We bathed our hands in the invisible heat it radiated, then turned around with our backs to the flames. Some rangers refused to move aside to let fellow rangers warm themselves.

“Move over, man. Make some room.”

“There ain’t no more room.”

“Then get the fuck out of the way and let me in. You’ve been standing here for ten minutes.”

“Fuck you.”

It was selfish, but some men simply could not help themselves. They knew they should move aside, share the warmth, but the physical discomfort of being cold was stronger than the will to yield the space and do the right thing. However, in other men, it was a character flaw. Their desire to put their own needs above those of their fellow rangers was a testament to their character. None of the men who fit in that category surprised me. I could tell by the way they had behaved since we’d begun the course that they were self-serving. Their

behavior at the fire only validated what I already knew. *That's not a leader that others will want to follow*, I thought to myself. *He can't be trusted*.

We were standing on the side of a dirt road. Now, Black Hawks combed the desert floor looking for Lewis. I was facing south when I saw two pickup trucks approaching. As they neared, the trucks slowed, and I saw the driver's elbow come out of the window. He drove right up to the fire where the RI stood, not five feet from me. They were rabbit hunters. Both pickups had dog boxes in the bed with beagles in them. "Y'all missing somebody?" the driver asked over the sound of whining dogs.

"Yep," the RI answered.

"He's about two miles due south on this road," he said. "I tried to give him a ride, but he said y'all would be coming for him."

"You're shitting me?" the RI said.

"No. He's down there, and he's fine. Ain't hurt or nothing," the man said.

"Well, I appreciate it," the RI said, and the men continued on.

Using his hand-held radio, the RI relayed the information to the other RIs. A truck was sent to pick him up. "Damn it, rangers," the RI said. "Every damn morning, we make you recite what to do if you become lost. Stop! Do not fucking move! Shoot three fucking rounds into the air. How fucking hard is that?"

Everyone stared at the ground in silence. "Put the fire out," he said. "We're moving out."

The RI led us to another area, where he told us to set up a patrol base. Back in charge of the patrol, I began trying to organize our efforts, but the RI called me aside for my debrief. He asked me to tell him how I thought everything went. As I recounted the events: the ranger that wore his polypropylene underwear, multiple breaks in contact on the way to the objective, and a lost ranger, I realized that it could not have gone much worse. The RI just listened as I described what had happened. When I finished, he looked at me and asked if I had any questions.

"No, sergeant," I said, surprised at no commentary from him.

"Okay, go on back to the patrol base," he said, and I returned with absolutely no clue if I had passed or failed.

We never saw Lewis again. Later, we would discover that he had gotten up from the ORP and followed everyone toward the objective, but he was sleepwalking, or at least in a daze. Halfway to the objective, he realized that he did not have his M16 with him. Panic-stricken, he turned around and snuck back to the ORP. He found his rucksack and his rifle. We never carried our rucks with us to the objective, but for whatever reason, he took his ruck with him as he tried to find his way back to the patrol. That probably saved his life.

The interesting thing is that two or three rangers were always left back to guard the rucksacks. This was called ORP security. Pulling security at the ORP was usually an opportunity to get a nice break. Once everyone left for the objective, we would have at least an hour with no one around. Usually, an RI would swing back by just to spot-check us before the assault, but all the RIs would be at the objective for the actual assault. While they were gone, we could put some snivel gear on, maybe eat some food, and then sleep until we heard the machine guns initiate the assault in the distance. Once we heard that, it was time to pay attention because they would be back to the ORP soon. Apparently, the rangers pulling security at the ORP that night were either already asleep or not paying attention, because they didn't even notice Lewis stumbling back into the ORP, securing his ruck, and departing again.

Ranger Lewis walked and walked, but he couldn't find us. Eventually, he saw the lights of El Paso on the horizon and, against all wisdom and common sense, began walking in that direction. Eventually, Lewis decided to stop. He put all of his snivel gear on, lay down, and went to sleep. He awoke when the hunters drove by. The rest is history.

The following night, three rangers from the 75th Ranger Regiment quit together, which is not uncommon. A man feels like a loser if he quits alone. Misery loves company, as the old saying goes. A ranger on the verge of quitting will make that decision almost instantly if his buddy will quit with him.

The day after the three rangers quit, we were in the patrol base, planning, when an RI announced that all those assigned to the ranger regiment were to come with him. The ranger regiment command sergeant major was there, and he wanted to speak with them. He was most likely visiting the Sergeant Majors Academy at Fort Bliss when he was informed of the attrition rate of regimental

rangers, so he decided to go motivate them.

When the meeting was over, long-faced rangers trickled back into the patrol base. Doc Black settled in beside me. “You know,” he said with a thoughtful and serious expression on his face. “I envy those guys.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Those that quit,” he said.

Now, this was a fascinating point of view. Most other rangers called them quitters and losers. They were weak. It caught me off guard to hear him say that he envied them.

“Yeah, right,” I said, assuming he was being sarcastic.

“No. I’m serious. It takes more guts to say I quit than to lay here and take it,” he said. “Hell, them boys will be eating hot chow and sleeping in a bunk tonight. I envy the piss out of ‘em.”

After a moment of silence, he spoke again. “I mean, I can’t quit. That’s not an option for me, but I sure as hell do envy them.”

Now that I think of it, a part of me envied them too. My dry, cracked fingers had gotten much worse. I could barely retrieve things out of my rucksack without making my fingers bleed. I protected them like they were made of glass. I wore gloves all the time to try and avoid snagging the wounds. Any exposed flesh on my fingers would snag on clothing and canvas. Something as simple as retrieving fresh socks out of my drybag caused me to wince in pain.

Searching for Lewis had robbed us of any sleep. We were going on two days without sleep, and it was taking its toll. I struggled all day but thought I had remained awake until I realized there was something in my patrol cap. I removed it. There, in my cover, was a piece of paper, neatly folded. It was a minor minus spot report for falling asleep in the ORP. I was so out of it that the RI had written the spot report, removed my hat from my head and placed it inside, then put my hat back on my head without waking me up.

On Thanksgiving morning, I lay on the edge of a mesquite mound, once again praying for sunup. I had laid my rain poncho on the ground and placed my quilted poncho liner on top of it. I lay down on one side and pulled the other side over me to form a taco with me in the middle. It wasn’t much, but it was the best

we could do. When it was my turn to sleep, I'd curl up in the middle and pull the poncho and liner up over my head.

I pulled security while my ranger buddy slept that morning. I watched a line of sunlight on the ridge in front of me slowly lower as the sun climbed far too leisurely behind me. After RI changeover that morning, our new RI stepped into the center of the patrol base. He was a tall, thick white guy, and he was smiling when he spoke. "Happy Thanksgiving, rangers. We've got some chicken broth and rice for you. Bring your canteen cup and file by one at a time."

Quick as a cat, rangers produced canteen cups like they were drawing swords. The RI dipped out steaming rice and a yellow broth with a ladle. The aroma caused my mouth to flood with saliva.

It was a Thanksgiving I'll never forget. The warm, salty broth was beyond my ability to describe. It smelled so good that I held the canteen cup to my nose and breathed the steamy broth in. I fought the instinct to gulp it down because I wanted it to last as long as possible. Some rangers guzzled it down and then used their fingers to wipe the inside of their canteen cup. They then licked their nasty fingers, ensuring that not one grain of rice escaped.

Morale soared that day. I found it interesting that something as simple as a canteen cup of rice and chicken broth could have such a profound effect on all of us. Each of us seemed to enjoy renewed energy, at least for a while.

That night an RI told one of our fellow rangers that it was his last chance to pass a patrol, so we knew it was our last patrol in desert phase. Most of the rangers chosen for leadership positions that night knew they had to pass the patrol to move on to mountains, so naturally, they were stressed out. In the end, some passed and some did not.

We endured yet another painfully cold night, and the following morning, just before daylight, the RIs unexpectedly told us to build a fire. Some things don't have to be repeated. We built a massive bonfire. It was so large we could not stand near it. Deafening flames roared into the desert sky from the brush pile we had assembled. We stood as close as we could without getting burned. The light of the fire cast shadows on gaunt faces. There was a primal feeling to that moment. We had just been through hell. None of us had ever been so tired, so hungry, so broken down, yet we were at the end of the phase, and many of us

had come out triumphant. We had survived this extreme experience, and it resulted in a primitive atmosphere—survivors basking in the heat of a fire in the barren desert. Since we were never sure when the phase would end, each of us had held back food. Now that we knew it was over, there was no need to hold back. So, like a pack of lions feeding on a carcass, we sat by the fire and voraciously consumed every morsel of food that remained in a matter of minutes.

Super Supper & Airborne Ops

November 1992

Soon a convoy of two-and-a-half-ton trucks showed up to take us back to McGregor Base Camp. We piled in on top of one another, shifting to find comfort among rucksacks and bodies. They must have put thirty of us in the back of each truck, but we didn't care. We were going back to the barracks. Desert phase was over.

Once we got to McGregor, we began cleaning our gear and inventorying all of our equipment. The general mood was very upbeat. Everyone that felt confident was talkative and positive because they felt that they were at the halfway point—two phases down. For those of us who felt confident that we were moving on to mountains, we felt relief and pride. Still, others moped around like zombies in disbelief. Having failed, they would have to await the next class and repeat desert phase.

That afternoon, an RI entered the barracks and announced, "Rangers, tonight is super supper. You can buy a bag of food for five dollars. Each bag contains two hot dogs, a bag of chips, and a Snickers bar. You also get a soda with the bag."

The room instantly lit up like a Christmas tree. If you can't comprehend how thrilling a two-hot-dog supper can be, I'd guess you've never been to ranger school.

"If you want two bags, you can buy two. That's why we call it SUPER supper, rangers," he added.

I don't know of a single ranger that did not buy two bags, and the RIs were counting on it.

One of them confided in me. "We're in the middle of nowhere out here," he said. "We don't have television reception. Super supper is our fundraiser to buy satellite dishes."

It was the first time I'd eaten an almond Snickers bar in my life, and it was delectable. Once the feast began, spirits soared, even among those who would be repeating desert phase. The attrition rate was high in desert. We'd lost a lot of rangers for patrol failures, a few more for bad peer evaluations, and of course, several had quit.

Peer evaluations were another measure to try and force rangers to be team players. At the end of every phase, we rated our fellow rangers. If all the rangers in a squad got along and didn't want anyone to get peered out, they simply gamed the system. They spoke beforehand and came up with a system to ensure that everyone got the same results. Each person would vote in a way that would produce the same results for each ranger at the end.

On the other hand, if they didn't like a ranger, they would conspire to all score him poorly. It was a way of policing our own. Obviously, there could be personality conflicts, so before the RIs recycled a ranger for peer evaluations they usually moved him to another squad to see if that helped.

That evening, John had decided that he was going to sneak off and use the pay phone to call and see if his son had been born yet. A fellow ranger talked him out of it. "You just passed desert phase, dude. They will throw you out if you get caught," he said.

"They won't even notice," John said. "Besides, I deserve to know if my son has been born."

"Don't do it, man. Look, just go tell an RI what's going on. I'm sure he'll let you make a quick phone call," the ranger said.

"Well, I guess it's worth a try," John agreed.

His fellow ranger was right, of course. Even the most hard-assed RI would certainly be able to see the importance of an event like childbirth, and thus a two-minute phone conversation to make sure mother and child were healthy would surely be allowed, if not encouraged!

After dinner, the RIs told us to go get a few hours of sleep. As we began filing back into the barracks, John approached an RI.

"Hey, sergeant, can I talk to you a minute?" he asked.

"Sure, ranger. What's up?"

"Sergeant, my wife is pregnant with my first son. She is due any day. She

could be over there having my baby boy at Fort Bliss right now, as we speak," he said.

"Ranger, that is fantastic news," the RI said, cutting John off and slapping him on the shoulder. "Congratulations! Now you'd better get in there and get you some rack because you will be rigging for a jump here in a few hours."

Demoralized, John hung his head and returned to the barracks. No matter how important a STUD thought his personal life was, the RIs had a way of helping him understand that he had but one priority—getting through ranger school.

The busses began arriving around noon the next day. By then, we had cleaned all of our gear, packed our bags, and did what the army does best—wait. The RIs pretty much left us alone, but they didn't need to haze us much anymore. Food and sleep deprivation were doing enough damage.

The drive from McGregor Base Camp to Biggs Army Airfield is pretty bland—nothing to see but desert. Knowing that I would be reporting to Fort Bliss, specifically Biggs Army Airfield, I did pay attention when we drove through the gates. The airfield was pancake flat with a massive two-mile-long runway and a water tower that could be seen from miles away. There was no grass or anything green for that matter. Everything was dry and brown.

The busses dropped us off at a hangar on the east end of the airfield. We stacked our B bags on pallets and prepared them for the flight to Fort Benning, then we filed into the hangar and continued waiting.

The metal walls of the hangar kept the biting wind off of us, but it was still bitterly cold. Our field jackets did very little to warm our emaciated bodies. I wasn't sure how much weight I'd lost, but it was significant. My ribs were visible, and my cheeks were sunken in. Rangers that were once lean and full were now gaunt and hollow-looking.

Some students lay on the cold cement hangar floor. Others sat with their backs propped against their rucksacks. There was only one restroom in the hangar, and it had three stalls. It was heated, so it was always full of people, whether they had to go or not. During the night, I got the urge to go.

I went to the restroom, but all the stalls were full. I waited a few minutes and returned, but once again, all I saw under the stall doors were boots with trousers

around the ankles. Finally, after several trips, I realized that it was the same boots under the doors.

"Hey!" I shouted, pounding on a stall door. "Wake up and get out of there. I need to use the latrine."

They ignored me.

"Dude, finish up your business and get out of there, or I am going to piss on your boots," I shouted.

Suddenly, I heard a loud fart in the end stall, and a voice said, "I've got action down here, so leave me alone."

"He ain't taking a shit," another ranger said, pointing at the stall door in front of me. "It don't even stink in here. He's sleeping."

Never in a million years did I dream that I would stand outside a stall in the middle of the night and debate whether a man was actually having a bowel movement or faking it just to sit in a warm room, but then again, a lot of unexpected things seemed to happen at ranger school. All three stalls were occupied by rangers who were sleeping on the toilet to stay warm—pretending to go. Once again, misery and discomfort drove selfishness.

It was selfish, so naturally it pissed me off. So, I kicked and pounded the door until the ranger finally relented and came out.

It was after dark when the RIs returned to the hangar and rousted us to draw parachutes. One by one, we filed by a trailer and drew a chute. We then returned to our rucksacks and began rigging. Once everyone was rigged, the jumpmaster inspected us. We then waited for the jets to arrive. This was the air force teaching the army how to wait.

Photo by Master Sgt. Sonia Pawloski/released

The jets began landing sometime in the early morning hours. It's very difficult to move when you are completely rigged with combat equipment. You can't really walk. You just waddle. They could have had us rig on the flight back to Fort Benning, but I suppose it's all part of the practiced misery thing.

"Okay, rangers, on your feet!" an RI ordered. "We are going to begin moving to the aircraft in chalk order."

This was going to be a mass tactical jump. The entire class, or what was left of it, was going to jump from C-141 Starlifter jets into Fryar Drop Zone. I had jumped Fryar DZ when I went to airborne school in 1988. It's a huge drop zone, so I was confident that the pilots would be able to deliver us into the field and not the trees.

We began slowly filing out of the hangar. That's when I saw the C-141s. They were at the departure end of the runway, all the way on the west side of the airfield. They were at least a quarter of a mile or more away, and we were combat-rigged. So, the Bataan death march commenced. We waddled our way like penguins west for the next fifteen minutes. Once on board, we just sort of lay down on the floor with an inboard line and an outboard line. Rangers lay on either side of the airplane, facing the center, in two long lines.

Because we are so adept at waiting, soldiers adapt by learning to sleep anywhere, anytime. As soon as we hit the floor, rangers began wiggling, trying to find a position comfortable enough to sleep. The flight from El Paso to Fort Benning would take almost four hours. We could not move, so the only thing we could hope for was to find a position of relative comfort and sleep.

What I did not anticipate is that every time I'd doze off, the jumpmasters or the air force crew would walk from the front to the back or the back to the front of the aircraft. There was no space to walk in the fuselage, so they had to walk across our bellies. We would be sound asleep, and suddenly, a 180-pound man would step on our bellies. They were not doing it to overtly deprive us of sleep, though. They just seemed to need to move back and forth through the aircraft a lot, and there was no other place to step.

By the time we got to Fryar DZ, I wanted off that airplane so badly that I would have jumped out with an umbrella in my hand. They got us up and to our feet about fifteen minutes out from the drop zone. We attached our static lines to a cable that ran the length of the airplane. The jumpmaster went through a series of commands to prepare us to safely exit the airplane.

Soon, the doors were opened on either side of the airplane, and the jumpmasters inspected the door. There were small red and green lights near the door. The red light was illuminated at the moment. The jumpmaster turned to face us and yelled, "Twenty minutes," over the sound of rushing wind and jet engines.

"Twenty minutes," every ranger repeated.

Ten minutes later, he faced us again. "Ten minutes," he shouted.

"Ten minutes," we repeated to ensure those in the back got the information.

Four minutes later, he yelled, "Six minutes," while holding six fingers up.

"Six minutes," we repeated.

"Get ready!" he shouted.

"Get ready."

"Outboard personnel stand up!" The jumpers with their backs to the outer skin of the aircraft stood up.

"Inboard personnel stand up!" The other two rows then stood up.

"Hook up!" the jumpmaster yelled, and we passed the word back. This is a very important task as each jumper connects his static lines to an anchor cable in the aircraft. This is the line that deploys the parachutes when we jump. No hook-up, no parachute.

"Check static lines!" came the command, and each jumper double-checked his static line to make sure it was properly hooked on to the anchor cable.

“Check equipment!” On this command, every jumper checked his equipment to make sure it was secured properly, and that the equipment for the man in front of him was also secure.

“Sound off for equipment check!” The jumper at the back of the line slapped the jumper in front of him on the backside and yelled “Okay!” This was repeated until the last jumper pointed his finger at the jumpmaster and yelled, “All okay, jumpmaster!”

Then there was a pause until the one-minute warning was given.

“Stand in the door!” the jumpmaster told the first jumper. With only seconds remaining, the jumpmaster ordered the first jumper to take his position at the exit door and those behind him to follow and get ready. With the first jumper in the door, we awaited the green light. When the pilots had us in position, they turned the light green, and then came the final command.

“GO!” And the jump was on.

After the six-minute warning, it all happened so quickly. Ranger by ranger, we filed out of the C-141. I pushed my static line forward, the jumpmaster grabbed it, and out I went. “One—one thousand, two—one thousand, three—one thousand, four,” and I felt the sudden shock. I looked up and saw a beautiful green canopy of silk above me. I grasped the risers to gain control of my canopy. So far, so good.

Suddenly, it was quiet and peaceful. It was one of the most wonderful feelings I’d had in hours, days, weeks. It was already morning. The sun was up. I thought, *If I could only stay suspended here in the air for an hour*. But all good things must come to an end.

There are several rules for the sky when we jump: 1) Keep a sharp lookout at all times. You never know when someone may drift, or drive, into you. 2) Constantly compare your rate of descent with other jumpers. I had a good canopy, and I could see jumpers to my left and right in long lines. 3) Slip right to avoid fellow jumpers. If two jumpers are headed toward one another and both slip right, they should avoid collision and entanglement. 4) The lower jumper always has the right of way. If a jumper passes over another jumper, the lower jumper steals the air of the higher jumper. Should a jumper wind up above a

lower jumper, he has to literally run off of the lower jumper's parachute. If he doesn't, his chute will collapse, and he'll fall below the lower jumper. Once he is below the lower jumper, his chute will open again, and he will steal the higher jumper's air. If they do not maneuver to get beside one another, they can leapfrog down until one unlucky paratrooper hits the ground with no parachute above him.

The key to a successful jump at this point is to get a clean exit from the airplane and avoid running into fellow jumpers in the air. Next, we must prepare to land. At approximately one hundred feet above the ground, or at treetop level, the jumper lowers his equipment, which is strapped between his legs. By pulling two quick releases, his equipment drops twenty-five feet, then hangs from a tether that is attached to him. As soon as his equipment drops, he slips, or turns, into the wind to slow his movement as much as possible.

It was a calm morning, so I had noted that we were hardly drifting at all. Still, I saw that my fellow jumpers were slipping left, so I did so as well. At twenty-five feet, I felt my equipment hit the ground below me, so I prepared for a good parachute landing fall. To be clear, any parachute landing fall one walks away from is a good parachute landing fall.

There are five points of contact: balls of your feet, calf, thigh, buttocks, and pull-up muscle, but as I heard General Stanley McChrystal say once, "You usually land like a watermelon thrown out of a second-story window."

On that day, however, I had one of the softest landings in my career. It was as though the earth was lined with pillows. I actually had to think about doing a parachute landing fall. I felt like I could have landed standing up. With little to no wind, my chute just lay down above my head. I activated my canopy release and decided to just lay there for a few minutes, basking in the sun. I was way out in the middle of Fryar DZ. The sun was warm on my face. It was so peaceful. *Just a minute*, I thought.

And then I felt something strange. I could not quite tell what it was, but it was somewhat of a tingly feeling. I couldn't put my finger on it. It was as though something was interacting with my skin from head to toe, and then suddenly, the flood gates of hell opened up, and fire consumed me.

The chief fire ant in charge gave the siren call to attack, and ten million fire

ants simultaneously bit me. I sprung to my feet and rid myself of the rigging in a split second. Then, while flailing and slapping at my body, I ripped my BDU blouse and t-shirt off. I tried to get my pants off, but I still had my boots on. I threw myself to the ground and shucked my boots off as quickly as I could. With my boots off, I could get my trousers and underwear off. Now, completely naked, I bounced around in a circle, slapping at exposed skin.

I had landed directly on top of a fire ant mound. No wonder the landing was so soft. I had then lay there long enough for them to swarm my body. “Ranger, what the hell is wrong with you?” an RI shouted, as he jogged up to me. He’d seen my bare-assed drop zone dance and no doubt thought I had lost whatever was left of my mind.

“Fire ants,” I answered, breathing heavily.

“Oh hell,” he said, inspecting my body. I was covered in tiny red dots, millions of them. “Okay, ranger, take your time. Let’s get them off your shit.”

The RI began beating the ants off my equipment while I tried to remove them from my clothes and get dressed. It took me well over thirty minutes to remove all the ants from myself and my gear. There were literally thousands of tiny red dots all over my body. Even with the ants gone, my skin continued to burn. I gained a new understanding for why they call them *fire* ants. I was left to assume that there was nothing that could be done to treat the bites because the RI did not offer anything but sympathy, which is more than I expected or had received up to that point in the course.

We bussed over to Camp Rogers, where we turned our weapons in, and the RIs released us for an eight-hour break. Once again, cabs lined the road by the gate. We went to Ryan’s Steakhouse and engorged ourselves, several rangers threw meatloaf up in the hedges, and the eight hours was over. I ate a generous portion, but I was careful because I did not want to join the sidewalk pukers.

When I returned to Camp Rogers, I saw John getting out of a cab. “What’s up, brother?” I asked.

“Well, I just spoke with my mother-in-law. I am the father of a strapping young man-cub,” he said, beaming with joy. “Luke was born while we flew back to Benning for the jump.”

“That’s awesome, man. Congrats!” I said, shaking his hand.

“Thanks, man,” he said, then added. “Hey, have you heard we may get busted up?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Some of the other guys said we may all get split up. I guess we had so many recycles and quitters that they are going to reorganize all the companies to even them out,” he said.

“Well, that sucks, but at least we’re going to mountains,” I said.

“You got that right, ranger.”

New faces greeted us after the break—the RIs of Camp Frank D. Merrill. And John was right: during our break, the RIs had reorganized all the companies. He was moved to Bravo Company. I hated to see him go, as we had grown quite close. As for me, I remained in Alpha Company.

We expected to jump into mountains, but thick clouds and rain prevented the jump. Instead, we boarded busses and headed north to Dahlonega, Georgia. I was nervous. Desert phase had been harder than I expected, and the mountains lie ahead. Almost every time ranger school had come up in conversation with those who had earned a tab, they’d mention mountain phase. That’s the true test for a ranger student.

Photo by the author

MOUNTAIN PHASE

5th Ranger Training Battalion
Camp Frank D. Merrill, Georgia

Lower Mountaineering

December 1992

During my senior year at North Georgia College, our military science professor, Major Rich Neikirk, invited a first sergeant from the 5th Ranger Training Battalion to speak to our class about platoon leader and platoon sergeant relationships. His name was First Sergeant Mike Ramsey, and he epitomized the ideal senior noncommissioned officer.

The day he visited, First Sergeant Ramsey wore the Vietnam-era green jungle fatigues (OG-107). Having moved on to the battle dress uniform or BDU, the army had retired the OG-107s. Only special operations units were still allowed to wear them, so naturally, what's different is often more attractive. First Sergeant Ramsey's uniform was starched hard as cardboard, and his trousers were tucked into green jungle boots that looked like they had walked at least a million miles on the Tennessee Valley Divide. Above his left breast pocket, he wore a pathfinder badge and master parachutist wings with a gold star in the risers, indicating he had jumped into combat. It was what we called a mustard stain, and it was the first one I'd ever seen in person. He earned it jumping into Grenada with A Company, 1st Ranger Battalion, where he served as a platoon sergeant for then Captain John Abizaid, who would go on to earn four stars and command US Central Command. Over the top of the two sets of wings sat a combat infantryman's badge.

First Sergeant Ramsey was on his third tour at the mountain ranger camp. He was somewhat of a legend in the ranger community, leaving a legacy that would one day land him in the Ranger Hall of Fame, and spending an hour with him made me question my career decision. From the time I had entered North Georgia College, I planned to become an infantry officer. I wanted to be an airborne ranger and spend my career in special operations units.

But then came the summer of 1990, which I spent at Fort Riley in Kansas.

That is where I was introduced to the air cavalry. I fell in love with the cavalry mission. While the other branches seemed more centrally controlled by a very hierarchal Cold War structure, the cavalry operated outside that paradigm. They were given much more latitude. The idea of operating based on my boss's intent, being empowered to go out independently and develop the situation in combat, was very appealing to me. And, of course, there was the Stetson hat and spurs that cavalrymen wore. At the last minute, I decided to branch aviation and pursue the air cavalry. Now, watching this ranger first sergeant, I began to second-guess my decision.

When most people think about the US Army, they visualize an infantryman—more specifically a ranger—and First Sergeant Ramsey was the poster child of the Ranger Regiment. Watching and listening to him made me want to be an airborne ranger.

At the end of his session that day, First Sergeant Ramsey was about to get up and leave, but he hesitated. "Gentlemen," he said solemnly. "Don't come see me in mountains in the wintertime." Then he slowly shook his head. "You don't want to see me in winter."

That was perhaps the sagest advice I could have received, yet there I sat, one year later, rolling up Interstate 75 in the dead of night, headed for Camp Frank D. Merrill in December. As I listened to the hum of bus tires on Georgia asphalt that night, I tried to think of something positive, tried to find the silver lining, but the only thing I could come up with was that there'd be fewer bugs. *We won't have to deal with ticks or skeeters*, I thought.

Then, trying not to disturb the ranger who had fallen asleep beside me with his head on my shoulder, I closed my eyes and slept.

General Frank D. Merrill was famously known for having led Merrill's Marauders in Burma during WWII. The camp named for him is tucked into the mountains of northern Georgia, just twelve miles northwest of Dahlonega. As the crow flies, it is also twelve miles from the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail at Springer Mountain, and forty miles from my hometown of Ranger, Georgia.

Having grown up and gone to college in the area, I knew the mountains around Camp Merrill like the back of my hand. I had even walked mountain

phase of ranger school with an RI in December 1989, when I participated in Ranger Challenge in college. Command Sergeant Robert "Bobby" Hand thought it would be a good experience for several of us to walk mountain phase over Christmas break. So, instead of going home, we spent the first ten days of our break that year tagging along with an RI as he put rangers through the course. Needless to say, 1989 was not my favorite Christmas break.

It's commonly said that ranger school begins in the mountains. By the time students get to mountain phase, everything they do is deeply affected by lack of sleep and exhaustion. Small, seemingly routine tasks become deliberate processes. One cannot truly understand exhaustion until they've literally had to work to summon enough concentration to tie their boots. As painful as it may be, this is where we learn things about ourselves that we would not otherwise know —what we are truly capable of. This is where we learn to lead ourselves.

The Chattahoochee National Forest is 749,444 acres of extremely beautiful yet challenging terrain. Combine the mountainous terrain and freezing temperatures with extreme fatigue and hunger, and you have a recipe for a new level of misery. Ranger students learn to deal with hazing at Fort Benning. In the desert, they freeze in the wintertime and try to avoid heatstroke in the summer. In the mountains, ranger students truly suffer. Fred had told me, "Mountain phase is a bare-knuckle brawl between the environment, your body, and your psyche. It's the place where most of us mortal rangers hit rock bottom, physically and emotionally."

Mountain phase begins with the principles of patrolling in mountainous terrain. During this block of instruction, we would learn basic rappelling techniques, how to tie a series of knots, and how to complete a land navigation course. Next, we would go to lower mountains, a rock wall below the main camp, where we would rappel for three days. We'd then go to Yonah Mountain, where we would spend two days mountain climbing. Yonah is commonly referred to as upper mountaineering. Finally, we'd enter the Chattahoochee National Forest for patrolling.

As we drove through the gate at the top of the hill, I felt strangely at home yet captive, like a convict must feel picking up roadside trash in his own hometown. Icicles hung from the boughs of white oaks, and frost highlighted cedars under a

blanket of fog. It looked anything but inviting. The entire landscape was shades of gray and brown. It was cold and hard.

As the bus slowed to a stop, I saw the cadre of RIs through the window. Steam burst from their mouths as they spoke to one another and pointed to the busses. The bus door opened, and an RI climbed aboard to issue instructions. His patrol cap was kicked slightly back on his head, and the brim was curled up. His face was bony and drawn, his chin sharp and dimpled. It was First Sergeant Mike Ramsey. “Listen up, rangers. I need you to get off the bus and secure your gear. Once you have your gear, we’ll take you to the barracks,” he said, very businesslike. “Now, let’s get moving.”

For many years, ranger students slept in small, open-air, wooden bays, much like those at Camp Darby, but in the late 1980s, actual barracks were built. As I exited the bus, I made eye contact with First Sergeant Ramsey. I nodded my head in acknowledgment, “First Sergeant,” I said.

“Told you not to come in winter,” he said matter-of-factly.

I kept walking.

They led us to the barracks, where we chose a bunk and grounded our gear. We then returned to the gravel road in front of the barracks. The RIs quickly oriented us to the camp, and we immediately began training. The first three days were designed to familiarize us with navigating and patrolling in mountainous terrain, as well as basic rappelling and rope-handling techniques.

I found the mountains to be much easier to navigate than the desert because I could terrain associate. I did not worry as much about direction and distance as I did understanding where I was in relation to ridges, valleys, hilltops, draws, and water sources. There are a lot of creeks in northern Georgia, many of which cannot be crossed without a bridge, a downed tree, or God forbid, wading them. The creeks are useful as boundaries. For example, when navigating, I would know that if I kept a creek on my left throughout a given valley, I would not stray off course. Or, if I reached a certain creek, I’d gone too far and needed to backtrack.

The RIs introduced us to the rope corral right away. During mountaineering training, we would have to successfully tie a series of knots to standard, and each knot would be timed. The rope corral is merely a nylon rope tied to trees in a

circle. The rope is approximately waist-high. Rangers choose a spot to stand on the outside of the rope coral. The RI stands inside the corral. Each ranger is given a piece of 7/16” nylon rope. The rope is approximately four feet in length, and commonly used to tie a Swiss seat for rappelling.

The Swiss seat is also referred to as the rappel seat. The 7/16” rope is tied around the rappeler’s waist and legs so that the rappelling rope can be attached to a carabiner at the waist. The rappeler’s body weight is supported by the seat as he descends a rock face.

Inside the rope corral, the RI announces the knot that the students must tie, such as a bowline, prusik knot, or wireman’s knot. Then, he will announce, “Go,” and rangers tie the knot to the rope in front of them using the length of rope they have been issued. When he says go, the RI starts a stopwatch. When the allotted time expires, he commands, “Stop,” and the rangers must immediately let go of their ropes and step back.

A poorly tied knot will fall apart immediately, resulting in a failure. The RI then walks around the rope coral, inspecting each knot. It is very common for the RI to slap the rope corral, causing the rope to bounce. If the student’s knot is not tight enough, it will uncoil itself and fall limp to the ground like a dead snake.

For me, knots were like the swim test. Who would go to ranger school, knowing they were going to be thrown into a pool of water, and not know how to swim? Who would go to ranger school knowing they were going to have to tie knots and not know how to tie them? Well, in both cases, people do. Knots proved to be challenging for many rangers. Even some students who knew how to tie them could not tie them tightly enough on the rope corral to pass the test. Those rangers recycled mountain phase because the knot test must be passed.

During those first three days in mountains, we also learned to tie a Swiss seat and built a rope bridge, which we would employ to cross creeks later in the course.

Because mountaineering is so dangerous, students are allowed to get more sleep and eat breakfast in the dining facility. Local civilians from Lumpkin County operate the facility, and they certainly know how to cook. At that time, a gentleman named Jimmy Padgett ran the dining facility at Camp Merrill. A typical breakfast included bacon, eggs, grits, toast or biscuits, gravy, and

blueberry pancakes. Mountain ranger camp is famously known for its blueberry pancakes.

I ran into John Uharriett outside the barracks on the third day in mountains.

“John,” I shouted as he crossed the gravel road outside the barracks.

“Hey, man. How you doing?” he asked in his usual cheery voice.

“So far, so good. How’s Bravo Company?”

“It’s fine. I’m just getting to know these guys, but they seem like good dudes. Just like us, trying to play the game and get the tab,” he said.

“Did you get to call Pam?” I asked.

“I did. An RI let me call the first morning we got here. Luke’s got an enlarged kidney, and the doctor is concerned about it,” he said.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Well, hopefully, I can call again before we start patrolling to check back in on them. Hey, man, you won’t believe what happened yesterday in the dining facility,” he said, changing the subject.

“What’s that?”

“I drew kitchen duty. About five of us had to serve chow. You know how dark it is in there,” he said. “Not much light gets in through the windows.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, for some reason, yesterday morning, the power kept flickering on and off in the dining facility. When it went off, it was as dark as the inside of a cow in there.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Well, every time the power went out, and it was dark, the five of us would stuff our mouths as full of food as we possibly could,” he said, laughing. “After about the fourth time, that good ole boy in there. You know the one that’s every ounce of 350 pounds.”

“Yeah.”

“He says to the lady beside him, ‘If that power goes out one more time, we ain’t gonna have enough food left to feed ‘em.’” And John bent over laughing.

“It’s good to see your spirits so high,” I said.

“Yeah, we’re living high on the hog right now, but it won’t last,” he said. “Gotta get it while you can.”

“Ain’t that the truth? This field problem is going to suck.”

“Yep. Ranger thought he was cold in the desert,” John said, then nodded while looking at the frost that highlighted a line of cedars along the wood line. “Mountain cold is gonna hurt a lot more.”

“No doubt,” I said. “I always heard that the west was a dry heat. Well, the south is a damp cold.”

“You’re not kidding. Yesterday, when I had kitchen duty, I had to be there early. It was just first light out when I left the barracks. I decided to smoke a cigarette before I went, so I went over to the smoking area. As I stood there, I just took it all in. There is an ominous brittle feeling to this place. The air is crisp. It stings to breathe in deeply. And it’s so quiet up here in these mountains, eerie quiet. The only thing I could hear was the sound of water rolling over rocks in the river. It was peaceful yet unnerving. Then, I heard a loud pop like a small-caliber gun firing. I realized it was the limb of a tree exploding because the sap had frozen,” he said.

“It’s gonna suck, no doubt, but I expect we’ll survive,” I said.

“Yep, that we will,” he said confidently.

Breakfast in mountain phase was somewhat of a sacred experience. The blueberry pancakes were famous, of course, but that wasn’t my favorite. I preferred biscuits and gravy. I pictured the cook in my mind’s eye. Perhaps he was a good ole boy from Suches with greased-back hair, sweat running down his face and dripping from his nose as he labored over a hot stove. A man that knew his way around a kitchen because he loved to eat so much that he felt duty bound to become a cook. It was his calling in life.

Or maybe it was a fat woman with an apron and a hair net. A woman who learned as a young girl to knead dough with her hands. Who made biscuits as big as a cat’s head and knew to paint a little butter on them so they’d get crispy on top. A woman who chunked her gravy with sausage and put just enough flour and milk to make it thick and creamy.

The pancakes were good, but the biscuits and sausage gravy, they were like religion—sacred.

On the third day, we ran the land navigation course in three-man teams. I paired

up with two other rangers in my squad, and we ran through the course fairly quickly. Again, it was easy for me to navigate because I had negotiated that course several times in the past, so I knew where the points were. We finished early and took a nap in the woods before returning to camp.

Day four took us to lower mountains. Lower mountains is a sixty-foot rock face tucked into a narrow valley, just below Black Falls, along the Etowah River. It's only about a 600-meter walk from the main camp along a trail that parallels the Etowah. In spring and summer, it's beautiful down there. Mountain laurel lines the banks of the river, and it blooms a vibrant white and pink. There's a large pool in the river just north of the rock face where we would rappel. For many years, the game and fish department stocked the Etowah with rainbow trout at that location.

That portion of the camp is simply referred to as "lowers." When we arrived, the RIs instructed us to tie a Swiss seat. Once they were tied and the RIs inspected us, we began rappelling. First, we just went off the rock in a basic rappel. Then, we Australian rappelled, which is to go off the rock while facing downward. Finally, we rappelled with our gear on (weapon and rucksack).

It took the entire first day for each of us to get through the first two rappels. Rangers would possum on the rock face, and it took a long time to get them down. When a ranger possums on the wall, it's usually because they let their upper body get too low, so their feet would slip on the rock and go straight up. It's extremely difficult to recover from this inverted position without assistance. An RI would have to rappel down on an adjacent rope and help get them back upright. This slowed the process of rappelling significantly.

The other common mishap is for a ranger to smack his face into the rock. This often happens because the ranger rappelling does not want to lower his body into a good L-shape position. Instead, he tries to rappel somewhat upright, but his feet slip, and he smacks face-first into the rock.

Each rappelling lane had a ranger on rappel and another ranger belaying him at the bottom. The rope is fed through a carabiner on the Swiss seat. If a ranger at the bottom of the mountain wraps the rope around his waist and leans back, applying his body weight to the rope, the friction on the carabiner will stop the ranger rappelling.

The RIs made us test this system several times to gain confidence. Once a ranger was tied into the rappel rope at the top of the mountain, he'd yell, "On rappel."

The ranger at the bottom of the mountain would reply, "On belay."

If the ranger at the bottom was not paying attention and did not respond to the ranger rappelling, then the RIs would explode. They considered this a safety violation. We lost two rangers for safety violations due to poor belaying on the first day. The ranger belaying must give his undivided attention to his buddy on rappel. Several other major minus spot reports were issued due to safety infractions at lowers. Safety was a clear concern for the RIs. They did not suffer fools in mountains.

Once the ranger on rappel was about halfway down the rock face, he would let go of the rope and throw his hands straight out. Simultaneously, he would shout, "Falling!"

The ranger belaying would then tighten the rope around his waist and sit back with all his body weight. The rappeler would fall a few feet then stop. The RIs had us do this to show that, as long as we had a ranger belaying us, there was nothing to fear. We would not fall.

Because loose rocks often fall from the rock face, we were required to wear our helmet liners at lowers. The helmet liner is the softer liner that went inside our steel pots. A piece of masking tape was stuck across the forehead, and our roster number was written on it. The RIs kept up with which rappels we'd completed by writing our roster number down as we completed each one. I did not make it through the second day unnoticed.

I had just completed a rappel and transitioned to belay the next ranger when the RI supervising belayers saw my roster number. "Double O Seven," he said. "We got James Bond in this class."

You've got a roster number 007 in every class, I thought to myself but dared not say it. I tried to ignore him and focus on belaying, but he was having none of it. "Bond, let's see you free-climb that rock," he said. "Go on. Show us how to climb."

I walked to the rockface and began trying futilely to climb. It was impossible. Lowers is a flat wall of rock that had been blown out using dynamite years prior.

There is no way to grasp the rock. I climbed maybe six feet before I fell.

“Come on, Bond. You’re a damn secret agent. Get your ass up that rock,” he said, and I heard the laughter of several other RIs now gathering to watch.

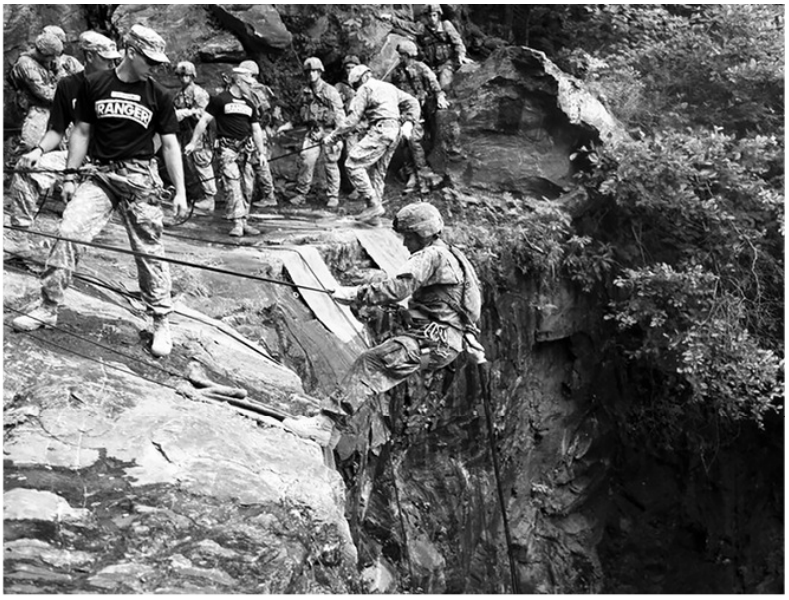
I continued to try and climb, falling over and over. It was quite silly, actually, but this RI seemed to enjoy it. After several minutes, one of the other RIs approached me. He grasped my shoulder and turned me to face him. “I know you,” he said. “I’ve seen you in the paper. You were a North Georgia cadet, weren’t you?”

“Roger, sergeant,” I said, unsure what strange act I might now be required to do.

“You were the corps commander last year.”

“Yes, sergeant,” I replied.

Photo by Spc. Eric Hurtado/released



Rangers rappelling at lowers.

I was certain more hazing would come, but he simply pointed at the rockface and told me to move out. I returned to the rope and yelled up the mountain, “On belay!”

The last day of lowers is the most challenging. Even if a ranger is not scared of heights, this day is nerve-racking. The two final rappels are the buddy rappel and the litter rappel. I knew we were about to do the buddy rappel, so I paid close attention as the other rangers rappelled. I wanted someone with confidence as my partner. I also wanted someone my size.

Once I found the right guy, I approached him. “Hey, we’re going to do the buddy rappel at some point today,” I told him. “We’re about the same size and both know how to rappel. Let’s partner up.”

“Okay, sounds good,” he agreed.

The buddy rappel simulates one ranger being wounded and the other ranger has to rappel off a mountain with him on his back. The wounded ranger is tied to the healthy ranger’s back using the length of rope we used as Swiss seats. The rappel is tricky because the other man is heavy, and he is hanging from the rappeler’s back as he inches over the cliff.

The scary part is not rappelling. It’s being the wounded ranger that feels helpless and vulnerable. The injured ranger is only attached to the rappeler by a length of rope. When the rappeler backs off the rock face, sixty feet up in the air, you feel all of your body weight transition to the rope holding the two of you together. At that moment, a shot of adrenaline surges through your body, and you hope like hell you tied those knots right.

Fortunately, I chose the right ranger. We made it smoothly through both rappels. Others did not fare so well. Many would not remain square to the rock with their feet spread apart, so they’d fall sideways. Once the feet go and the rappeler is laying against the rock, it’s almost impossible to right oneself. So, the RI would rappel down and assist, all the while telling the ranger student what a dumbass he is.

The final rappel was even more nerve-racking—the litter rappel. On this rappel, a simulated injured ranger is strapped to a litter. Two rangers rappel down the mountain on parallel ropes with the litter between them. They slowly guide the litter down the rock face. Being helplessly strapped to a litter and lowered down a sixty-foot rock face is anything but comfortable.

I had rappelled a lot throughout my life, but things like the buddy rappel and litter rappel were extremely uncomfortable for me. Over the years, I had learned to compartmentalize the fear in order to complete the task at hand. I simply told myself that this had to be done. If you have to eat a frog, don’t stare at it too long. Just get on with it. I had no choice, and fear would only increase the likelihood of making a mistake. I recognized the fear, acknowledged it, then set it aside and focused on what I must do to accomplish the task. This would serve

me well years later in combat in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

With lowers complete, we would now go to uppers—Yonah Mountain. Other than climbing, I knew nothing else about uppers. I knew that rangers went there to climb and stayed for a few days, but I had no idea what else might take place on that mountain. I'd soon find out.

Yonah Mountain

December 9, 1992

Yonah Mountain, or Mount Yonah as locals call it, is a large rock face just outside Cleveland, Georgia. Yonah is the Cherokee word for bear. Legend has it that a beautiful Cherokee maiden named Nacoochee fell in love with a Chickasaw warrior named Sautee. Tribal elders forbid their love, but they refused to be separated. A war party followed Sautee and Nacoochee to Yonah Mountain and threw Sautee from the cliff. Distraught, Nacoochee then jumped to her death—a lover's leap. I don't know if the legend is true, but there is a small unincorporated town named Sautee Nacoochee, Georgia in White County, as well as a Sautee Creek.

On beautiful spring days, Yonah can be seen clearly from Cleveland, but fog and mist consumed the mountain as we approached that December morning. We would rappel and climb at Yonah for two days. Each ranger would have to successfully conduct a standard climb using ropes, anchors, and carabiners, a free climb—which meant climbing with no equipment—and a two-man buddy climb.

The RIs also told us that on the second night, each platoon would present a skit. Nothing was off-limits for the skits. We could make fun of RIs, ranger school, or anything else we wanted, including the president of the United States. Bill Clinton had been elected president the month prior but had not yet been sworn in as our new commander in chief, so he was still fair game. At first, we were not sure how to take that. The RIs had never joked with us, yet they seemed sincere. Nothing was off-limits. Maybe we would actually laugh together.

Photo by the author

Mount Yonah.

The rock was covered in ice, and we were not allowed to climb with gloves. My fingers went numb almost immediately. Then, they began to ache with pain. I blew my breath into my hands over and over to try and warm them. I thought for sure someone would be killed on the rock. Several rangers did fall, and a couple were injured. It seemed like it was just part of doing business at that point. I was reminded of the ranger in Fred's class that fell off the slide for life at Victory Pond and died. Certainly, no RI wanted a ranger student to die on his watch, but they did not act as though they cared.

The days at Yonah were filled with a lot of waiting. Despite having several lanes to climb on, only a handful of rangers were able to climb or belay at any given time. The rest of us sat on rocks and watched. Because the RIs were laser-focused on the students that were climbing and belaying, they left the rest of us alone. Thus, the atmosphere was much more relaxed on the mountain.

Photo courtesy US Army/released

An RI explains the climbing lanes at Yonah Mountain.

The first night, the RIs told us we could build a fire and develop our skits. Meanwhile, they built their own fire, well away from us. The warmth of the fire was welcomed. That night was a full moon, and a total lunar eclipse occurred, but we were too tired to remain awake to see it. We gathered around the fire, some rangers sitting on rocks, others on the ground. Those who smoked lit cigarettes. Others packed their lips with snuff and spit into the flames. A couple of students took control and led the discussion on the skit for our company. They argued over the funniest and most absurd things we'd experienced. For the most part, their ideas revolved around being hazed at Fort Benning—the typical *Full Metal Jacket* scenario with Gunnery Sergeant Hartman yelling at students, only it was an RI instead of a marine gunnery sergeant. One student suggested that we all just get online and walk through the woods yelling, L-E-W-I-S, every time our left foot hit the ground. The idea did merit some laughs but was quickly dismissed for fear that it would not be lively enough for the RIs.

It didn't take long, basking in the warmth of the flames, until we began nodding off. Slowly, one by one, rangers began to move away from the fire. Here and there, small groups huddled up to talk. I excused myself to take a leak but did not return to the fire. Instead, I crawled down inside my mummy bag and slept.

The second day, we continued mountaineering. The hardest climb for me was

the free climb. There were several spots on my lane that required a leap of faith. The taller rangers could reach and grasp a small ledge, but I could not. I was forced to commit and go for it. If I didn't get my fingers up and over the ledge, I'd fall. Adrenaline raged in my veins, and my heart beat fast as I gathered my courage and leapt for it. Fortunately, my fingers landed firmly on the ledge, and I grasped the rock as firmly as I could. Barely, but I made it.

That night the RIs gathered around the fire with us, and each platoon gave their version of what was essentially the same skit. One student portrayed an RI, and another student made stupid ranger student mistakes. The RI would scream and yell and haze the student. I assumed that the RIs had seen the same skits at least a hundred times. All the skits were lame except for one.

From 1990–1994, Jim Carrey portrayed a character named Fire Marshall Bill on the hit TV show, *In Living Color*. It was December 1992, so all of us were familiar with Carrey's over the top, physical style of acting. There was a ranger student built somewhat like Jim Carrey, tall and lanky, and he could act just like Fire Marshall Bill.

We'd seen him practice, and he was funny, but that night, he became the character. First, he turned his back to us and adjusted his patrol cap so that it was cocked to the side. Then he turned around to face us, and his face had been completely contorted. He was Fire Marshall Bill.

He strode around the campfire, arms flailing, and improvised about ranger school for at least ten minutes.

"Lemme show you something," he said, then strode to an RI. "Say you're just walking through the woods, and you come upon a group of rangers sitting around a campfire. Know what the number one cause of forest fires in North Georgia is?" he asked, leaning down to within inches of an RI's face.

"Dumbass rangers," he said, answering his own question. Then he strode over to the fire, picked up a burning limb and threw it into the woods to everyone's amazement. We were stunned that he actually threw a burning limb into the woods, but it only added to the intensity of his character.

"Better put that out before we burn the whole damn forest down," he said flippantly, then continued working the group.

"Know why Smokey the Bear exists?" he asked, once again nose to nose with

an RI.

“Dumbass Ranger Instructors that let students build fires,” he said, again answering his own question.

With his front teeth protruding and his neck flexed so that every tendon could be seen, he owned the crowd. At times, rangers rolled on the ground in laughter, and when he finished, everyone wanted more—including the RIs.

“Do it again,” one RI said loudly. “One more time.”

It was the perfect note upon which to end mountaineering. A bunch of grown men, in the dead of night, acting like fools on the top of a mountain, while going through the toughest leadership course on the planet. It was absurd. I don’t know if the skits were calculated or if some RI simply got a bright idea one day and it stuck. The contrast to the seriousness of the course made it ideal for the moment, because what lay ahead would humble the best of us.

The Tennessee Valley Divide

December 11–20, 1992

We bussed back to Camp Merrill the following morning and immediately entered the barracks to pack our rucks for the field problem. An hour passed before an RI entered the barracks and said, “Listen up!” at which time everyone immediately stopped what they were doing and gave him their attention. “I need you to move up to the bays for layout and inspection. You know the drill. Lay your poncho on the ground, and then lay all of your equipment on top of it. You’ve got ten minutes, so let’s get moving.”

The wooden bays were where we would conduct our bay planning, but first, the RIs would inspect our gear to ensure we had everything on the packing list. More importantly, they would also check to make sure that we did not have anything we were not allowed to carry to the field—contraband. Each student was allowed one can of snuff or pouch of tobacco for every two days, a piece of hard candy or gum per day, and a pack of cigarettes for every two days. The nicotine was quite helpful when it was critical that we remain awake.

We lay our ponchos out on the ground around the bays and placed all of our gear on them: three pairs of socks, an extra set of BDUs, three t-shirts, and so on. Those who used tobacco products had already found rangers who did not. Each ranger was allowed to carry their allotted amount whether they dipped, smoked, or not. I did not smoke or dip, so I agreed to carry Copenhagen for a fellow ranger.

Soon after our gear was laid out, an RI came through to inspect us. He was prison camp thin with an abnormally long neck and a prominent Adam’s apple that bobbed as he spoke. For reasons I can’t explain, he reminded me of a spider.

“Okay, rangers, I am going to inspect your shit. Don’t start packing it back in your ruck until I tell you to do so,” he said, and with that, he dove elbow deep into the first ranger’s rucksack. “I been doing this for years. You can’t get shit

over on me," he warned. "You got contraband; I'll find it."

He was referring to any unauthorized items that a student might try and bring along, specifically food, or pogey bait, as we called it. He continued to speak loudly as he dug through every pocket and pouch.

"I've seen it all, rangers. I'm a fuckin' bloodhound," he proudly announced. "Had a ranger empty a can of boot black one time and fill it with milk chocolate. Can you believe that? He melted that shit down in a shoe polish can, but I found it."

From the time he arrived, he had not stopped talking. When he finished inspecting one ranger, he'd move to the next, but the lecture continued. He finished inspecting the ranger directly behind me, and when he moved on to the next ranger, the student he'd just inspected picked his ruck up and began packing his gear away. The RI froze. Still bending over the next ranger's gear, he slowly turned his head to face the ranger who was now packing his gear away. The abrupt stop to his discourse caught everyone's attention. You could have heard a pin drop. "Ranger," he said calmly, a disgusted expression now plastered across his face. "Are you as stupid as you want to be?"

"No, sergeant," the student replied, falling for it.

"No? As in you'd like to be more stupid?" the RI asked, still looking at him with this expression that said, *You are the stupidest human I've ever met.*

Confused as to how to appropriately answer this vexing question, the student began again. "What I mean to say, sergeant…"

"Just shut the hell up, ranger," the RI said, cutting him off. "Did I tell you to pack your shit?"

"No, sergeant."

"I didn't think so, but you did it anyway. Right?"

"Yes, sergeant," the ranger said, now flustered.

"Ranger gonna do what ranger wanna do!" the RI said, slow and sarcastic. Then, he shook his head and resumed the inspection, and his lecture, as if he'd never been interrupted. "One time, this ranger took the bottom off a can of Colgate shaving cream and filled it with peanut butter. I found that shit," he said proudly.

"You ain't gettin' jack shit over on me, rangers. Not me."

And to my knowledge, we didn't. No one tried to carry contraband into the field in my platoon, or at least the bloodhound did not find anything.

Once the RI inspected the last ranger, he stood and looked at the student who had begun packing his ruck before being told to do so. "Okay, rangers, *now* you can pack your shit."

After our rucks were packed, we lined them up in rows beside the bay, propped our rifles against them, and began planning the first mission. We would patrol in squads or sections of nine to twelve rangers during the first three days. The RIs would set a command post up in a tent on top of Hawk Mountain. Everything revolved around Hawk Mountain, primarily because of communication.

There were no cell phones or satellite radios back then, only FM radios. Each squad carried an AN/PRC-177 FM radio. The radio's range was five miles, depending on the terrain. It was a line-of-sight radio, so sometimes in order to talk we had to climb a mountain to get into the line of sight of those with whom we wanted to communicate. The radio also weighed 13.75 pounds, so being appointed the RTO, thus having to carry the radio in your pack, was quite the burden.

Since Hawk Mountain was the tallest mountain in close proximity, it only made sense to perch the command post on the top. It also meant that inevitably, at some point, we'd have to climb up there for a mission.

Our first mission was to conduct reconnaissance of the fish hatchery, which is where the game and fish department raises the trout they stock in the local rivers. It was not overly cold the day we stepped off for our field problem. The sun was actually shining when we passed through the simulated forward friendly unit, which meant that we were now moving beyond our forward lines and into enemy territory. After walking about one hundred yards, we took a knee and conducted SLLS. I noted a squirrel high in a white oak barking at us, pissed off because we spoiled his breakfast. But I saw little else. I wondered what it might feel like to actually do this in a combat situation.

After patrolling as forty-man platoons in the desert, going back to squads of nine rangers made movement easy. We could see the entire patrol as we walked, so we moved quickly and didn't have any breaks in contact. The hardest part

about reconnaissance missions was staying awake. The patrol leader divided us into three teams and told us to meet back at the rendezvous point in six hours. We moved to a position where we could observe the hatchery without being seen, and for the next six hours, we drew sketches of the property and counted how many people came and went. The sun on our backs was welcomed, but it made staying awake exponentially more difficult.

Around noon, we heard the popping of rocks coming up the dirt road. An older couple drove up in a short-bed Ford pickup. They got out and walked to the long pool to see the trout. The man took pictures with a Polaroid camera. He handed them to his wife, and she fanned them in the air as they developed and dried. Then they looked at them together. They walked around the hatchery for about twenty minutes, completely unaware that they were being watched. Finally, they climbed back into the truck and left. Not a shot was fired that day.

The next day was also brisk but sunny. Our mission was a linear ambush on a dirt road. The RI told us that the enemy was expected to be on the road in the afternoon, but he had us move to the designated location in the morning. This meant we'd have to lay in the ambush for a while, waiting on the enemy.

It was our second daylight mission, which I liked because we seemed to get more sleep at night. The patrol leader put me in the security position, which meant I, and my ranger buddy, would be separated from the assault force and the security force. Our job was to notify the patrol when we saw the enemy coming. That meant that we had to remain awake. If we fell asleep, the enemy could surprise our patrol.

We found a spot to lie on the ground about twenty meters off the old dirt roadbed. We were behind a mound of dirt, which gave us a bit of cover, but we had good visibility of the road. I felt fine when we lay down. In fact, I wasn't sleepy at all. So I told my ranger buddy to take a ten-minute nap, then I'd wake him up. Almost instantly, I could hear his deep rhythmic breathing. Suddenly, my eyes began to grow heavy. One minute, I was fine, then my head began to bob as I fought to stay awake. It had only been five minutes, maybe less. I couldn't wake him yet. Then I thought of the Copenhagen I carried for another ranger. It was inside my rucksack. Just a little pinch would give me a shot of nicotine, and I'd be awake.

I reached inside my rucksack and retrieved the snuff can from a Ziplock baggie. It looked somewhat like worm dirt and had a distinct earthy smell. With my thumb and forefinger, I pinched the snuff and inserted a modest portion inside my lip. Using my tongue, I packed it right in the front of my lip. The fear of getting sick alone put me on alert. I was so paranoid that I spit if so much as a drop of saliva accumulated inside my mouth.

Almost instantly, I felt the light-headed buzz the nicotine produced. Unsure how intense the buzz would become, I considered spitting it out but ultimately chose not to. I decided that I'd have no problem dealing with the associated high it produced.

The next thing I remember is waking up gagging. The lump of Copenhagen had slid to the very back of my tongue. Panic-stricken, I worked my tongue back and forth desperately to try and keep from swallowing the snuff. It was too far gone. In an instant, the lump was in my throat, and involuntarily, I swallowed.

My first thought was to cram my finger down my throat to try and throw the snuff up, but the RI was certain to hear me force gagging myself. My next thought was to dilute it with water. I reached for my canteen, unscrewed the top, and guzzled the entire quart of water. When I finished, I took my other canteen out and did the same with it. Two quarts of water in my belly with a wad of snuff. My heart raced as I considered how miserable it would be to try and patrol while repeatedly vomiting. *Please don't let it make me sick*, I prayed silently. Fortunately, I did not get sick, and the ambush went off without a hitch.

That evening we set the patrol base up in a draw that was thick with mountain laurel. Since we were patrolling as squads, there was only one RI, so he remained in the patrol base with us. As the sun set, the temperature began to drop rapidly. The RI, who had been quite cordial all day, told us to gather wood for a fire. He did not have to tell us twice.

"Okay, here's the deal. Keep it small and under control," he said. "I don't want a big bonfire that will burn the forest down. Keep it small, but big enough so that all of you can warm up. Someone has to watch it, so one of you had better stay awake. Rotate who is watching it, but the rest of you can sleep."

We were dumbstruck. He was going to let all of us roll up in our ponchos and liners and go to sleep. He then sat down and leaned back against his rucksack.

Who was this guy? Why weren't there more of him?

The next morning at RI changeover, we were sad to see him go. He had literally joined our squad for twenty-four hours. The new RI issued an order to conduct a raid, and then, right after we finished, he gave us a follow-on order to conduct a linkup with the other squads. We were going to join the platoon back together that night and begin what the RIs called field problem thirty-three.

We planned the mission in the patrol base and then waited until the appointed time to move out. We'd have to walk about two kilometers to the linkup point. The cold temps made us uncomfortable, but the toughest part of the mountains thus far was the terrain. We were rarely on flat and level ground. We were always climbing, descending, or walking along the side of a ridge on a slope. As we lay there waiting to move out, I noted that thick dark clouds had begun moving in. If the clouds obscured the moon, walking in the woods would be much more difficult. Worse yet, it could rain.

The Tennessee Valley Divide (TVD) runs along the ridgeline that Hawk Mountain sits on. Having spent a lot of time in those mountains, I knew that it could be sleeting on one side of the TVD and sunny on the other. I could only hope that we were headed to the sunny side after linkup.

As soon as it was dark, the ten of us, including the RI, made our way to the linkup site. The patrol leader gave the sign by flashing a red lens flashlight three times. After receiving the appropriate response, we moved forward, and the patrol leader was challenged with a codeword. He gave the appropriate response and then took a knee. As each of us walked by, he looked us in the face to make sure he recognized us. This was to make sure that an enemy fighter had not infiltrated our ranks.

With the platoon now formed, the RIs assigned leadership positions and told us that we would be climbing to the top of Hawk Mountain that night. The following morning, UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters would pick us up. Our follow-on mission would be a combination air assault and parachute jump.

We moved out around 2100 hours, and about an hour later, a light rain began to fall. Sometime around midnight, the skies opened up. We were cold and tired, and now we were wet. With the level of misery increasing, we began to struggle. Because we were walking up a steep mountain, we leaned forward at the waist.

Leaning forward caused us to keep our heads down, so we stared at the ground instead of at the ranger in front of us. The rain was so loud that we couldn't hear our footsteps, so naturally, without being able to see or hear, we soon had our first break in contact.

The RIs noticed it before we did, of course. They let us go for a couple hundred meters more before stopping the patrol and informing the patrol leader that he was missing a large portion of his patrol. He sent two rangers back to get the others and bring them forward. When they rejoined, we resumed the ascent.

The trail up the mountain is rocky and rugged. Rangers repeatedly tripped on rocks and stumbled, so they walked even slower. Then, the rain-soaked ground became slick in places, so rangers slipped and fell. Soon, we had our second break in contact. This time, it took us at least fifteen minutes to get everyone back together and moving again. At that point, the RIs took over.

"Rangers, get in line on the trail. I want you to be able to touch the ranger in front of you," an RI said, trying to be heard over the sound of pounding rain. "Do not fall back. Make sure you can reach the ranger in front of you. Now move out."

The trail he was referring to was the Appalachian Trail, which snakes its way through switchbacks to the top of Hawk Mountain, and that night, it was our Everest. The first three days had been somewhat gentle on us. Squad patrols had softened us up a bit, but the climb up Hawk would break many of us.

Like ducks in a row, we droned on in the rain. Each ranger student had sewn two small strips of illumination tape to the back of their patrol cap and rucksack. They are called cat eyes, and they enabled us to see one another in the dark.

Under the burden of our heavy rucksacks, we bent at the waist and wearily crawled our way up the mountain. I tried to focus on the cat eyes in front of me as they wobbled along. After a while, staring at the cat eyes seemed to put me in a trance. In utter darkness, the cat eyes began to move radically. In a semiconscious state, I thought I was experiencing autokinesis. The cat eyes danced up and down then left and right. Then they left the trail altogether, and suddenly began down the side of the mountain. I had stared at the cat eyes for so long, it was as though they were what I was following—two glowing dots. My mind had seemingly removed the ranger student that wore them altogether. I

wasn’t following another man, only the tiny squares of illumination tape that moved left then right, up then down, and now down, down the mountain.

“Ranger!” an RI yelled. “Wake your ass up.”

The ranger in front of me had departed the trail and was heading off the ridge—sleepwalking. I was mindlessly following him.

Soon, we had yet another break in contact, which forced us to stop. At that point, the RIs made us hold onto the rucksack straps of the ranger in front of us. They were clearly losing patience with us. I was sure that the RIs wanted to summit Hawk Mountain as badly as we did. With rangers now tethered together like a daisy chain, we trudged on in the night.

I realized that we were finally near the top of the mountain when I saw white lights ahead. Three or four beams of light emanated from a small structure. The RIs would not use white lights unless there was an emergency, and no civilian would camp on the extreme slope of the mountain. It was the Hawk Mountain shelter on the Appalachian Trail. Six or seven hikers had taken shelter inside the three-sided wooden structure. They had clearly heard something in the woods. Once cozy inside their mummy bags, now they stood and gawked at weary rangers carrying heavy loads, pressing on in the pouring rain like mindless zombies.

The hikers were huddled close together. I saw a woman standing with her sleeping bag draped around her shoulders. A tall man with socks pulled over his hands held a flashlight on us. They whispered to one another and pointed as we walked by with our heads down.

Just beyond the crest of the mountain, there were several large, green, canvas tents set up. The RIs filed into the one designated as the command post tent.

“Rangers, get in those tents and out of this rain,” an RI said. “It’ll be light soon, so get some sleep.”

At least two inches of soft, oozy mud covered the floor of the tent. A couple rangers lay down in the mud and immediately went to sleep. I set my rucksack down and sat on it. Now that we had stopped walking, I knew we were about to freeze, so I fished through my ruck and found a dry shirt and socks. After changing both, I put my elbows on my thighs, put my head in my hands, and tried to sleep.

Despite being so tired, men were restless that night. A steady flow of rangers walked in and out of the tent, which soon turned the soft mud to soup. I drifted in and out of sleep for an hour or so, then jolted awake as my head fell off my hands. I had to pee, so I went outside. The soupy mud caked to my boots as I walked. It had stopped raining. The still mountain air was now filled with the high shrill chorus of crickets. I finished my business and started for the tent when I noticed several rangers behind the tent smoking. The orange glow of burning tobacco was bright in the pitch-dark night. I recognized John. He was staring into the darkness, smoking a Marlboro.

"Better out here than in that pig pen, ain't it?" I said, walking up beside him.

"Yeah. This is something else, isn't it?" he said.

"Yep. It's a new kind of miserable. That's for sure," I said. "You had a patrol yet?"

"I got a squad leader position a couple of days ago. You?"

"Me too. Squad leader on a raid. I think I got a GO. How about you?"

"Yeah, I think I passed mine too," he said.

"How you holding up?" I asked him.

"Well, I've felt better, but I'm okay. Feel like I got sweaters on my teeth, but I'm too tired to brush 'em," he said. "How about you?"

"Well, I'm still on the right side of the dirt," I said. "I had a scare on an ambush when we first started."

"How's that?"

John listened as I told him the story of waking up just as the dip went down my throat, and how I'd panicked and tried to dilute it with water.

John chuckled. "Well, did it work?"

"Must have. I didn't get sick. Maybe I was just lucky," I said.

"I guess so," he said. "Or maybe it was just fate, a story you'd be able to tell me that would make me laugh on one of the most miserable nights of my life."

"Maybe that's it," I said. "Well, the rain's quit, old friend. I think I'll get my ruck, find a place to sit, and try to get some sleep out here."

"Yeah. It'll be daylight soon. I'm going to do the same." John said, then rubbed the cigarette out on the side of a tree.

Trying not to step on anyone, I slipped and slid my way through the mud in

the tent to retrieve my rucksack. Back outside, I found a fallen tree where I could spread my poncho out on the ground and sit on it. Then I leaned back against the tree and slept.

"Let's go, rangers," an RI said. "Ruck up and let's go. I need accountability."

The sun was scheduled to rise at 0700 that morning, but if it did, we didn't know it. On such a foggy morning, daylight had to work desperately hard to steal the night. Thick fog filled the space between the trees, creating a steel gray wall. Being on top of Hawk Mountain, I assumed we were inside a cloud.

The RIs who woke us were new, so I assumed they had driven up before daylight. Once we managed to get everyone together and accounted for, they assigned new positions, then gave us our next mission. It was a linear ambush on a road near Cooper's Creek, but Cooper's Creek was a long way away. Then I remembered, this was supposed to be an airborne operation. *There's no way we can fly in this,* I thought.

Nevertheless, we planned the mission then walked to the pickup zone, which was a small field on top of the mountain, not one hundred meters from where we sat. The helicopters were going to pick us up and move us back down to Camp Merrill, where we would rig and then jump into a farmer's field at Cooper's Creek.

The wind was blowing at the pickup zone. Now, with more light, it was easy to see that we were socked in on the mountain. A blanket of clouds enveloped the entire mountain. We assumed what we call PZ posture, which meant we were staged and ready to get on the birds as soon as they landed. They told us it would be a few minutes before the helos arrived, but I didn't believe they would arrive period, so I took the opportunity to change my socks and powder my feet.

I had changed my socks when we got to the tents, but because my leather boots were soaked, my dry socks were now wet. My feet were snow white and pruned. *At least they aren't blistered*, I thought. I took my time, letting the cold air dry them as much as possible before dusting them with foot powder. Dry socks would feel so good until I put them back in wet boots.

I was dumbfounded when I heard the familiar sound of rotor blades in the distance. I could not see across the field. There was no way they could descend

through the clouds into a tiny field surrounded by one-hundred-foot-tall trees. *We're about to be at the scene of a crash*, I thought to myself. But if he does manage to land, I sure don't want to be on board. The bad thing about becoming a pilot is that you understand just how scared the guy in the back of the helicopter should be. Ignorance is bliss, I suppose.

The patrol leader, the RTO, and an RI moved to the edge of the field and took a knee. The rest of us were just inside the wood line. I could see the patrol leader talking on the radio—to the pilot I assumed. The helos circled over us, but we could not see them through the clouds. Several times, it sounded as if they were hovering just above us.

After about five minutes, the RI shouted, "Where's that pilot? Rangers! Where's the pilot?"

Surely, he's not talking about me, I thought. *How would he even know I was a helicopter pilot?*

"Damnit, rangers. Which one of you is the pilot?"

"Here, sergeant," I finally said.

"Get over here and talk to this guy," he said.

"Roger, sergeant."

What was I going to tell him? If you try and land, you'll probably crash and take half of us out with you?

I took the hand mic from the patrol leader and called the pilot.

"Roger, how's it look in the PZ?" he asked.

"Zero, zero," I said, meaning that the ceiling was zero meters, and the visibility was zero meters.

"Well, I'm VFR on top. I can see the PZ through the clouds every now and then," he said.

Every now and then. *So that means you can't see every now and then as well, genius*, I thought.

"You can't get in here," I told him bluntly. "The PZ is surrounded by trees, and it's a small field. We're in the clouds."

"I think I can sneak in," he said. "Like I said, I can see through it every now and then."

The clouds grew thin suddenly, and I could see the helicopter at a hover about

250 feet above us. Then it vanished in the clouds as quickly as it had appeared. The next time the clouds parted and I saw him, the nose of the helicopter was pointed up forty degrees or more, and he was drifting backward fast.

As soon as I saw him, he caught it and threw the cyclic forward to level the airplane. “You’d better abort before you crash,” I said into the mic.

“You’re right,” was all he said, and he left.

The RIs huddled up. Then one called out, “Let’s go, rangers. Follow me.”

Trucks were already waiting on a forestry service road behind the command post. The RIs had ridden up for RI changeover in them. They had to assume we might need them, so they had remained on the mountain.

We were extremely quiet that morning. Not that we were able to talk a lot anyway, but that morning it was clear that everyone was beginning to suffer in earnest. Many had that thousand-mile stare in their eyes. The walk up Hawk Mountain in the rain the previous night had taken a toll. We were wet, muddy, and tired and still had a long way to go.

We climbed into the trucks, and they drove us down the mountain. We stopped at the flight landing strip (FLS) at Camp Merrill. The FLS is a long grassy strip that parallels the Etowah River for over 2,500 feet on the east side of the camp. As we descended the mountain, we finally broke out of the clouds. As I suspected, the mountain was socked in, but the valleys were clear.

Once again, I was not chosen to jump, and once again, I really didn’t care. After the jump, our follow-on mission was to be a linear ambush. We’d have to walk all night to be in position for the ambush at first light the following morning. Of course, the drop zone was in a valley, and the ambush was on a road near the top of a mountain. We’d be walking up a mountain all night, and as we’d soon find out, the rain wasn’t finished with us yet.

Those of us not jumping divided into chalk order, which is basically into our squads, and waited for the UH-60 to return and pick us up. Those who were going to jump began rigging on the south end of the FLS.

Soon we heard the familiar *whop whop whop* of rotor blades. Three Black Hawks landed, and the crew chief motioned for us to approach the bird. Bending at the waist to avoid the rotor blades, we shuffled to the birds with our rucksacks in one hand and our rifles in the other. We piled into the helicopter, and it took

off. We flew with seats out, meaning the crew had removed the seats, which made sense because we were too bulky to fit in seats with all our gear. The more concerning part was that we flew with the doors open, which was not only cold but nerve-racking. I suddenly remembered that these were the same pilots who had tried to land in the cloud.

I held on tightly and prayed that we'd have good weather all the way to the landing zone.

We flew about one hundred feet above the trees, but the pilot banked hard left and right as he followed the contours of the mountainous terrain. I was on the left side of the aircraft, so every time he banked left, I'd hold tight to the ranger beside me, praying I didn't fall out.

Eventually, the helos began to slow, and I could tell we were starting our approach to the landing zone. As soon as the wheels touched down, we exploded out of the helicopter, ran just outside reach of the rotor blades, and lay down on the ground. Once everyone was off the bird and the crew chief gave the thumbs up, the birds took off.

The landing zone was nothing more than a farmer's field near Cooper's Creek Wildlife Management Area. With the helicopters now gone, we walked up a ridge and established a position that overlooked the drop zone where we would wait until the jumpers joined us. It was now partly cloudy, so the sun peeked in and out of the clouds. Albeit momentarily, the warmth from the sun was welcomed on such a brisk, damp day. After about an hour, we heard the helos returning.

As they flew over the center of the field, rangers began jumping out of both doors. There were several trucks parked along a dirt road on the far side of the field, along with an ambulance. Just in case.

As I watched the men drift down under big green canopies of silk, a part of me wished I had jumped. I loved the rush of adrenaline, the sudden shock, and then floating in silence. After they landed, the jumpers gathered their chutes, stuffed them in kit bags, and turned them in to the cadre at the trucks. Then they began making their way up the hill to our position.

Another hour passed before the helicopters returned with more jumpers. The first chalk jumped from the lead bird, then the second. When the jumpers on the

second helicopter jumped, I saw two jumpers collide beneath the helicopter. They had jumped from opposite sides, but collided underneath. Both of their main canopies opened but quickly became entangled and collapsed.

The jumpers were falling fast. One jumper was tangled in the risers eight or ten feet above the other. The top jumper activated his reserve parachute. It opened but then tangled with the two main chutes. It was partially open and reduced their rate of descent, but they were still falling fast. Had the reserve been fully open, it would have felt as if they were falling faster than normal, so with a partial canopy, I am sure it felt like they were on the free fall at Six Flags.

The bottom jumper now activated his reserve, which opened but then also tangled itself in the other three chutes. There were now four parachutes above them. There was nothing left they could do. The two men were at the mercy of silk, air, and God.

The bottom jumper was tangled up in the risers in an awkward position. His reserve seemed to be pulling him up at the waist. He was falling in a flat position, belly up. If he could not get upright, he'd land on his back.

At about fifty feet above the ground, the two reserves caught air, and both partially opened. From where I lay watching, I could see that it instantly slowed their descent. Still, the bottom jumper landed with a thud, flat on his back. The other ranger managed to execute a proper parachute landing fall, but it was a hard landing. RIs and medics sprinted across the field to the two jumpers. The bottom jumper did not get up. The medics carried him to the ambulance on a litter. We never saw him again.

The other ranger got up and walked it off. I watched as he bent over, put his hands on his knees, then stood upright, bent backward, and looked into the sky. Soon, he regained his composure, shook his head yes to the RIs, and began gathering his gear. An RI pointed to our position on the hill. The RIs took care of the tangled knot of parachutes, and the ranger made his way to our position. Upon arrival, everyone whispered to him asking if he was okay. "Yeah, I'm okay," he said. "Hurt like hell, but I'm okay."

It took all afternoon to complete the jump and get everyone in the patrol base on the hill. Knowing that I knew the terrain, the patrol leader asked me to walk point and navigate for him. It would be a long hard night of walking. We were to

conduct an ambush along a small dirt road on the back side of the mountain, but we'd have to climb a big mountain to get there.

Just as we began strapping our rucksacks on and standing up, we heard a ranger yell for the RI. It was the ranger who had been entangled in the jump. He decided to take a leak before we began walking. His urine was pure blood. We delayed until an RI from the trucks ran up the hill to fetch him. Then we began walking.

It wasn't completely overcast, so the moon peeked in and out of passing clouds, which illuminated the landscape somewhat. Navigating was fairly easy for the first three hours or so. I simply walked straight up the mountain. There were no trails, so we walked single file through the woods. We put the M60 machine guns up front since they carried the heaviest loads. "We'll move as fast as they can go," I'd told the patrol leader.

Stepping over downed trees or gouging in mountain laurel thickets really slows a patrol down, so I did my best to choose a smooth path. Sometimes we had to wind ourselves around downed brush, but it was better than trying to force our way through it. The moonlight made navigating much easier.

Once we got to the top, I stopped the patrol to check the map. Lying under a poncho, I found a spur that would give us a good vantage point of the road. We began down the spur, but it didn't seem right to me. The terrain just didn't feel like it was the right spur. I stopped, checked the map again, and realized that we needed to go over to the next spur.

I explained to the patrol leader that we needed to backtrack back up and then go to the next finger off the high ground. I led the patrol back up to the top of the ridge. We then walked another hundred meters south, before turning down the next spur. I took us about one hundred meters, then stopped the patrol.

"It's right down there," I whispered to the patrol leader.

Two RIs had joined us at the front of the patrol.

"I can't see it," the patrol leader said.

"Trust me. It's right down there, maybe one hundred meters," I told him.

I could tell that he wasn't certain. He wanted to believe me, but he couldn't see the road, so he was skeptical. He had to trust that I knew exactly where I was based on looking at a map and seeing the terrain in the dark. Meanwhile, the

senior RI pulled a pair of night vision goggles out of his rucksack. They were the old AN/PVS-5 night vision goggles—primitive but useful. The RI looked through them, and I heard him say softly, “I’ll be damned.”

He handed the NVGs to the other RI and said, “Look right down there. You can see a line along the ridge. That’s the road.”

“Yep. That’s it,” the RI answered.

“Come here, ranger,” he said to the patrol leader. Handing him the goggles, he pointed and said, “Look right down there and tell me what you see.”

The patrol leader now looked through the NVGs. “It’s a road,” he whispered.

“Yep. That’s your objective, ranger.”

The RI then turned to me. “What’s your name, ranger?”

“Blackmon, sergeant.”

“Well, Ranger Blackmon, that’s some shit hot navigating. You just got yourself a major plus spot report.”

“Thanks, sergeant.”

After a quick leader’s reconnaissance, we set the ambush. We lay down in a row paralleling the road on the uphill side, so when we assaulted through the objective, it would be downhill. Each of us chose a tree or a log to lay behind. We were about five meters apart. The most challenging thing about laying in an ambush is staying awake. To guard against that, we tied paracord to everyone’s leg. When the first ranger saw the enemy coming, he would tug on the cord to alert the next ranger. Then, that ranger would pull the cord to alert the next one. And so on. If a ranger had drifted off to sleep, this would wake him up. We could save the ambush by ensuring that everyone was awake.

Just after daylight, four enemy soldiers appeared. I felt the string tug on my leg, so I tugged to alert the next ranger in line, then pointed to the enemy. The ambush was to be initiated by a claymore mine, which we had set up along the road. When it went off, we’d all open fire.

The enemy walked by us. The patrol leader then simulated detonating the claymore and nodded to the RI, who threw a grenade simulator toward the road.

Boom! And we opened fire on the enemy, who fell to the ground instantly. In ranger school, the enemy is simulated by a platoon of soldiers whose sole purpose in life is to get ambushed by ranger students. In mountain phase, they

are called the aggressor platoon. That day, I was left to assume that they just wanted to get it over with because they did not put up much resistance. They fell dead as soon as we began firing.

The squad leader ordered us to move forward. Once on the other side of the road, two rangers searched the four enemy combatants, then we moved back to our rucksacks, where the senior RI stopped us, changed leadership positions, and gave us a grid for the patrol base.

The new patrol leader asked if I'd also walk point for him and navigate us to the patrol base. I agreed. It was a short, easy walk to the patrol base, but now that it was fully light out, I noticed that a fresh blanket of clouds had moved in. More rain was on the way.

Once we arrived at the appropriate location, it was up to the patrol leader to decide where to set up the patrol base. I held my hand up and clenched my fist to halt the patrol. We all took a knee, and the patrol leader came forward. "This is it," I told him.

"Where do you think?" he whispered, wanting my opinion on where we should set up.

I pointed to a small draw just off the side of the ridgeline, on the leeward side. It was in our best interest to pay attention to the wind. We'd be spending the day in the patrol base. It was bitter cold, so the last thing we needed to do was add a biting wind to an already miserable situation. "We'll be off the beaten path right over there, and we'll be out of the wind," I told him.

"Okay, let's go," he said.

Once everyone was lying in their fighting position, the RIs disappeared. We went through all the priorities of work, but the RIs didn't issue us the next mission until it was almost dark. Normally, we departed the patrol base soon after it got dark, but this would be a late start. We had struggled to stay awake that day. The climb up Hawk Mountain, followed by the long walk up the mountain at Cooper's Creek, had really begun to take its toll. Not sure when the patrol leader would be ready to start for the objective, I told my ranger buddy that I was going to sleep for a few minutes.

I have no idea how long I slept, but I woke suddenly to a loud clap of thunder. Lightning streaked across the sky, and rain was hammering down. It had clearly

been raining for a while, so I was confused as to how I had slept through it. I was lying in a tiny ditch in the center of the draw, and water was actually flowing underneath me. Then I remembered. I had gotten my polypropylene top out of my rucksack, but I hadn't closed it. I just lay my head on it, but my ruck and my wet weather bag were still open.

I jumped to my knees and saw that a stream of water now flowed into my wet weather bag. That's where my dry clothes were, and that's the one place that absolutely had to remain dry. Frantically, I tried to pour the water out and tie it closed, but it was too late. My dry clothes were now soaking wet. What was I thinking? Why had I not closed it up? How could I be so stupid?

Our next mission was a raid about six kilometers away. The leaders finally told us to ruck up around midnight. Squad leaders, the patrol leader, and the platoon sergeant tried to get exhausted rangers to begin moving, but few were cooperating. No one seemed to want to move. Guys were taking forever to pack their wet gear in their rucks. That's when I heard it.

A shrill whistle for about four seconds. Then an explosion. "Artillery!" screamed several rangers, and we hit the deck.

Another shrill whistle and a subsequent *BOOM!*

"Artillery!"

Then the patrol leader took charge and initiated the drill. "Nine o'clock, 400 meters!" he yelled, which meant that everyone was to run in a direction of nine o'clock for 400 meters. Once there, we'd link back up and get accountability.

Some rangers had still been cramming things into their rucks when the RIs had thrown the artillery simulators. Others were off and running, if you can call it running. Running with a seventy-pound rucksack on our backs and an M16 in our hands in the steep mountains of northern Georgia in the rain was an ugly sight to behold. I ran by rangers leaning against trees, trying to catch their breath, while others took a knee, unable to run any further.

"You rangers better get moving," I heard an RI say.

I plodded on. 400 meters is a quarter of a mile. The drill was designed to get everyone at least 400 meters from the impact point where the artillery had landed. If they shot again, we'd be out of the way, but 400 meters is a long and difficult distance in the mountains.

Rangers were strung out all along the ridge, and it was dark. I wondered if we'd ever be able to locate everyone. It took us at least fifteen minutes to get everyone together. We were loud, so all you had to go was run to the sound. The patrol leader told the platoon sergeant to get accountability. The platoon sergeant turned to the squad leaders. "Give me a headcount," he ordered.

Squad leaders began trying to find everyone in their squads. Five minutes passed, then ten. "Ranger!" and RI said sternly to the patrol leader. "Do you have accountability or not?"

The patrol leader wasn't sure. We'd counted a couple of times, but the number was off. The shrill whistle again.

"Artillery!" multiple rangers shouted.

BOOM!

"Twelve o'clock. 400 meters!" the patrol leader shouted, and we were off and running again.

Once again, I stood and began to labor under the weight of a heavy rucksack at a jog. It wasn't fast, but I made it look faster than a walk. My legs were fatigued, but they had grown somewhat used to always laboring under the heavy load. My back had also gotten as used to the rucksack as could be expected. It was the whole-body fatigue that seemed to have such an effect. We were malnourished, sleep-deprived, and so tired that all we wanted to do was lie down on the ground.

I stopped by a tree to catch my breath. "How long you think this will go on?" a ranger kneeling by the tree asked me.

"Until he runs out of artillery simulators," I said.

"How long you think that will be?"

"Well, I don't expect he brought more than four or five. He's probably got a couple grenade simulators too, but he'll want to save something for the objective," I said.

I had thought I was tired at Fort Benning, but I didn't know what tired was yet. Then in desert, I thought I understood cold and miserable, but I did not know what I did not know. Now, in mountains, I had reached yet another level of fatigue. I began to wonder where my breaking point might be if it kept getting worse. Then I quickly put the dangerously negative thought out of my mind. *Just put one foot in front of the other. That's all you have to do*, I told myself. Put one

foot in front of the other, and eventually, you'll be at the next objective, then the next patrol base. Then one day, you'll be eating blueberry pancakes and drinking a cold Coca-Cola.

Eventually, we found everyone, organized ourselves, and began moving toward the objective. It rained on us all the way. Then it rained on us all the way to the patrol base, which we did not reach until about 1000 the next morning. The sun set at about 1630 hours that day, but the sun may as well have been on Mars, because we could not see it through the rain clouds. It was dark before 1700, and that's when we began gouging through mountain laurel yet again.

Mountain laurel and rhododendron grow abundantly in northern Georgia. They are beautiful blooming plants, but gnarly to try and navigate through. They grow in thick groves. Most of them aren't larger than a grown man's arm, but they are stiff, crooked, and thick. Too thick for a ranger with a rucksack to fit through them as he walks.

For what seemed like the rest of the night, we pushed and pulled our way through mountain laurel. Due to the cloud cover, there was no visible moon to help us see. We gouged and fought forward in utter darkness. In places, trees had fallen, so we'd run into them with our shins as we walked.

On most nights, when the patrol begins, ranger students are tactical. They move out in silence, using hand and arm signals to communicate. Once inside the mountain laurel, rangers curse and fall and trip. In a normal, conversational voice, students will warn others, "Log!"

"Lookout. Limb!"

"Motherfucker!"

It's easiest to just focus on getting oneself through the woods at night. As we walk, inevitably we push limbs out of our way. It's best to just allow limbs to brush off of you and keep moving. The next ranger in line should remain far enough back so the limb won't fly back and smack him in the face as it brushes off the ranger in front of him. However, many rangers, desiring to be courteous to the ranger behind them, hold the limbs with their hands. Then they attempt to hand the limb off, under tension, to the next ranger in line. They mean well. They don't want to smack their buddy with the limb, but this almost never works. The handoff is fumbled, and the limb, now close and under tension,

whips back and smacks the next ranger in the face.

Repeatedly, we had to stop in order to get everyone through the thickets, then get accountability. If we were not already tired enough, wrestling mountain laurel certainly put everyone well beyond their limits. It would only get worse.

I wasn't sure what the temperature was, but I knew it was near freezing. Since we were wet, the RIs never let us stop moving for long. If they stopped us for an hour or more, they'd have to let us build a fire, or we'd die from hypothermia.

Since I wasn't in a leadership position, I did not have a map. I wasn't exactly sure where we were going, but my squad leader had mentioned that we had to cross a creek. After we finally got through the mountain laurel, we began walking off a ridge. Soon, I could hear running water. We were nearing a stream, but it was no bubbling brook. With all the rain, it sounded like Niagara Falls.

When we reached it, the RI stopped the patrol. It would be impossible to wade across the creek. The RI appeared to be trying to decide what to do. He studied a map and gave the patrol leader coordinates to a crossing point. A large tree had fallen across the creek about a kilometer upstream. He told the patrol leader to take us to the crossing point.

The creek ran along the base of the mountain, so walking parallel to it forced us to walk on an extreme slope. Rangers slid and fell as we negotiated the rugged terrain. As we scrambled along the side of the ridge, I realized that we were supposed to hit the objective at first light. That time had come and gone. We missed the objective.

When we reached the downed tree across the creek, the RI had us gather around. "Rangers, we're going to cross the creek on this log," he said, pointing to the log. "Take your time, and whatever you do, do not fall in the damn creek."

His demeanor was different. I could sense his sincere desire that we not fall into the creek. He did not care if we spoke out loud or helped each other in any way. Just don't fall into the water.

The RI took a position at the base of the log, and one by one, we began to cross the creek by walking across the log. The downed tree was at least eighteen inches in diameter, but there were no limbs or anything to hold on to. Each ranger had to keep his balance and ease across by placing one foot in front of the other, much like the log walk rope drop at Victory Pond back at Fort Benning.

In every organization, there's someone who was not in line when God issued balance. That one guy, that no matter how hard he tries, can't walk and chew gum at the same time. He was standing two rangers in front of me.

I watched this ranger take his first step onto the log. He immediately thrust his arms straight out and began bending like a tightrope walker trying to regain his balance. The log was plenty big enough to walk across, but it was like he was suddenly possessed. "Ranger!" the RI said. "Just put one foot in front of the other and walk your ass across this creek. Take your time."

Photo by Craig McHood

John Uharriett and Jimmy Blackmon back on the Appalachian Trail near Hawk Mountain in 2007.

Instead, the ranger began shuffling his feet, which was perfectly fine. He slid one foot forward several inches, then slid his trail foot up. Again, he slid the lead foot forward, then the back foot. Then he bent at the waist. He lifted one foot off the log completely as he tried desperately to regain his balance, but he also had a seventy-pound rucksack on his back.

Once he was on one foot and leaning, the weight of the rucksack would take him off the log. No amount of flailing with his arms and other leg was going to help him recover. He crashed into the creek on his side.

"Damn it, ranger!" the RI screamed as he scrambled down the bank to try and get to him.

The water was not over the ranger's head. It was swift and awkward to balance with a heavy rucksack on his back, but the ranger managed to stand up.

“Just walk out ranger,” the RI said.

He began walking toward the RI. “Not this side, dumbass. Hell, you’re in it now. Walk out on the other side.”

Eventually, everyone made it across the creek. “Rangers, go find the driest wood you can and build a fire. Now, hurry up!”

I saw the RI look at his watch multiple times. Clearly, we had missed the objective, but I wondered what the backup plan was. We were supposed to be somewhere already, and now, we were delayed much longer.

It took half an hour, but we eventually managed to get a fire burning. In the meantime, the ranger that had fallen into the creek stripped and changed into dry clothes. The RI let us dry out and warm ourselves for an hour or so before he told us to put the fire out.

We continued to the objective. We were about three hours late, and there was no enemy there, but the RI had us go through the motions of the raid anyway. I don’t know if anyone passed the patrol. I doubt it.

Three Forks

December 1992

When the snuff and cigarettes began to run out, morale plummeted to a new low. It was like kicking an already beaten man in the gut just for good measure. Men started using their redip, but it wasn't the same. Rarely did a dipper let his lip go empty. He'd just replace one dip with another, but because he knew that sooner or later, he'd run out of snuff, he took the used dip out of his mouth and placed it back into a snuff can, still in the halfmoon shape formed between his lip and gum. Later, when he was out of fresh snuff, he would put the dip back in and redip it. Like the vegetarian who had a change of heart, I was now dipping. I had dipped every bit of the Copenhagen I had agreed to carry for another ranger and was now begging others to share with me. I was unquestionably the most miserable I had ever been up to that point. It would get worse.

After the simulated raid, we had walked about a thousand meters and set up a patrol base. I knew we were not far off from a road because I heard the trucks pull up with the fresh RIs. As I lay there, on the side of that mountain, cold and miserable, watching water drip from an icicle on an oak bough, it occurred to me that I might freeze to death. My ranger buddy and I—two grown men who'd met six weeks prior—were spooning to avoid hypothermia.

We had dug a small slit trench in the middle of the patrol base, and I was contemplating having to use it, when the newly appointed patrol leader knelt beside me.

"Blackmon, will you walk point on my patrol?" he asked.

"Sure. Where's the objective?" I asked, hopeful that the distraction would make the urge to defecate pass.

He gave me the grid coordinates, and I plotted them on a crumpled forestry map that he pulled from his cargo pocket. "Three Forks," I said.

"What?" he asked.

“Three Forks. That’s where the objective is. I know the area well. I’ve camped there,” I said.

“Good. Then you should be able to get us there.”

Three Forks is the location where Noontootla, Stover, and Long Creeks all converge. As a child, I’d camped there with my family countless times. Later, when I was at North Georgia College, I returned to camp there often.

Our patrol base was on the edge of a large area that had been clear cut a couple of years prior. Walking directly to Three Forks from there would mean fighting our way through brush piles, wait-a-minute vines, and saw briars all night long. It would be worse than mountain laurel, and we certainly would not make it to the objective before sunrise.

I didn’t want to climb Rich Mountain, but I did know that we could climb above the cutover, then parallel the ridge for a while, and then we’d hit the Benton Mackaye Trail. That trail would lead us right to Three Forks, and it would be easy walking. It would, however, require that we walk a bit further than if we went direct.

I explained the situation to the patrol leader. “I trust you, man. Just get us to that objective. I have to pass this patrol,” he said.

“Okay, once it’s dark, put the M60s up front, and they can follow me. We’ll move as fast as they can move.”

Like so many other nights, we lay in the patrol base, waiting for darkness and knowing that night would mean cold temps and long walks. Leafless trees stood like skeletons of their summer selves at last light, sky lining the ridgeline above us. We readied ourselves, then stepped off. We hadn’t gone far when the RI came racing to the front of the patrol with his red lens flashlight and shined it in my face. “Take a knee, ranger,” he said with a scowl on his face.

“Yes, sergeant,” I said, and knelt.

“Where the hell are you going?”

“I’m going up the ridge, then west. We’ll hit the trail and follow it down to Three Forks,” I said with complete confidence, praying he would go along with my plan.

I could almost feel the thoughts tumbling over in his head. “What do you mean, ranger?”

“Well, sergeant, if we go direct to the objective, we’ll be fighting brush all night. We won’t get to the objective until morning. If we walk up this ridge and then hit the trail, we’ll be there in three or four hours if we’re lucky,” I said.

He paused. “What’s your roster number, ranger?”

“007, sergeant.”

“You a North Georgia guy?”

“Roger that, sergeant.”

Another long pause. “Move out, ranger,” he said.

I subdued a smile.

While the walk was certainly difficult, we made it to Three Forks relatively unscathed and successfully assaulted the objective at first light. After the mission was over, we walked back down to Three Forks and waited for the RIs to change out leadership positions then give us the grid coordinates for the next patrol base. While the RIs huddled together, rangers did the rucksack flop. Everyone just lay down where they had been standing and lay back on their rucksack. We looked like upended turtles scattered all over the objective. Those who still had cigarettes smoked them.

I saw a young ranger in my squad who was suffering. Days prior, I’d noticed that he was sick. He became more withdrawn, quiet, visibly miserable. He was a young soldier from 3rd Ranger Battalion. He sat on a log, staring at his feet, and a strand of thick green snot drooped from his nose at least four inches in length. “You okay, man?” I asked, trying not to gag at the sight of the snot strand.

Nothing. His eyes were fixed on his feet, and his breathing was shallow. “You’d better get it together. When the RIs see you, they’ll go into a feeding frenzy. Come on, dude. Pick yourself up.”

Nothing. He didn’t blink. He didn’t even acknowledge that I was there. I sensed that he’d been fighting an inner battle for days, trying to decide if he should quit or go on.

Soon, the RIs returned, and sure enough, he was spotted. “Ranger!” one of the RIs said. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

He didn’t move.

“Ranger! Answer me. Do you want to quit, ranger?”

Nothing. He could not say it, but I saw it—as did the instructor. Mentally, he

had already given up.

“Wipe that disgusting snot from your face, ranger. Do you want to quit? Just say so. It’s that easy. Just say, I quit!”

Not even a blink. He continued staring at his boots. He could not say the words, I quit. Psychologically, he had quit, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth.

“Okay, rangers, ruck up. We’ve got about 800 meters to the patrol base,” another RI shouted above the sound of the fast-flowing ice water that coursed through the creek, like blood in the veins of the lush mountains.

Eight hundred meters, half a mile, to the patrol base, and then we’d begin planning for the next mission. The RIs now stood talking. I saw one point at the sick ranger, who still sat on the log, snot string intact.

“Dude, you’d better pull it together, or they are going to unleash all hell on you, and then kick you out anyway. Let’s just get to the patrol base. You’re gonna have to walk out anyway.”

Nothing.

If a student quit during the field problem, they were pulled from the patrol, but they didn’t get to go back to Camp Merrill. They remained in the field and walked with the RIs. The RIs made this clear to us, in hopes that knowing the misery would not immediately end would deter us from quitting. Why would someone quit if they would have to remain in the field and keep walking and enduring the elements anyway?

“Ranger, are you quitting?” the sergeant asked the student once again.

Nothing.

“Okay, you’re dead. This ranger is dead. Bring the litter,” the RI ordered.

A collective groan emanated from the patrol. Dead ranger meant we’d have to carry him to the patrol base on a Skedco litter. A half a mile in the mountains on a litter. We were weak, cold, hurting. I’d begun ranger school just forty-five days prior at 185 pounds. I was down to maybe 155 pounds—yes, thirty pounds in forty-five days.

The Skedco is a green plastic litter used to carry the wounded. The litter is rolled up and strapped to a ranger’s rucksack. The student with the litter made his way to us. We placed the litter on the ground and rolled him onto it. The

litter then wraps around the ranger and straps hold him inside like a burrito. We placed his rucksack on his chest. There were four carrying handles made of nylon webbing, two on either side. It was designed to have four men carry him like pallbearers carry a coffin, but pallbearers don't wrestle a coffin through the mountains with a seventy-pound rucksack on their backs. All four of us strained as we lifted him off the ground. I was at the front on the left side. A couple of the other guys tried to help lighten the load by lifting on the straps that held the Skedco together at his feet.

For the first two hundred yards, we'd be walking down Noontootla Creek Road. Then we'd head into the woods, up a draw. As soon as we began down the road, I could see several pickup trucks parked on the side of the road. At first, I thought it might be vehicles that the aggressors drove there. That would be strange though. Normally, they drove government pickups. Fifty yards further, and I could see more clearly.

It was a hunting party gathered around the tailgate of a truck. Then it occurred to me that it was that time of year for the Rich Mountain bear, boar, and buck hunt. They'd most likely hunted during the morning and were now meeting to eat lunch and swap stories. There weren't many deer in northern Georgia in those days, so they were most likely discussing the weather, or perhaps some tracks one of them saw on a dirt roadbed somewhere. Now, they were fixated on us.

One of the men wore a plaid wool jacket. His thick moustache bounced up and down as he chewed. He held a biscuit in his hand, half-wrapped in aluminum foil. The sight of the reddish-brown salty pork protruding from the biscuit made my mouth water. What I'd give for a tenderloin biscuit.

Two Stanley thermoses sat on the tailgate where piping hot coffee steamed from lids poured full. Just about every deer hunter I knew had a green Stanley thermos in those days. Heavy shadows indicated three, maybe four days of whisker growth on their faces. They'd been in hunting camp several days now. One of the men wore the Vietnam-era tiger stripe camouflage. Another, the Fred Bear camo pattern and a red-and-black wool Stormy Kromer hat.

The hunters had probably seen rangers in these mountains before, but I was pretty sure they'd not seen rangers carrying one of their own on a litter before.

All of them stared intently as we approached.

Suddenly, I recognized one of the men. It was Jimmy McDearis, my father's friend of many years. I realized that I would walk right by him as we passed the truck. *Maybe he won't recognize me*, I thought. *I'll just stare at the ground, and he won't see me. But what if he does? Then he'll call my name out.* I did not want the attention of the RIs. I decided to try and communicate without speaking.

The men inspected each ranger as they passed the tailgate of the truck. When I was within five feet, Jimmy's eyes locked onto mine, and his face instantly lit up. I saw him draw in a breath. His chest lifted, and he smiled broadly. I could tell that he was about to speak, so I looked deep into his eyes and slowly shook my head no. He stopped just short of calling out my name and nodded knowingly.

We departed the road and began up the draw through the woods. Every man struggled to keep his footing on the slick, uneven terrain. Carrying our fellow ranger was torture. There were nine of us, so five men got to rest, if you call humping a seventy-pound ruck in the mountains resting. Meanwhile, the other four carried the litter. As we awkwardly made our way up the ridge, one of the rangers in front slipped and fell, causing the casualty's head and shoulders to slam into the ground. He cried out in pain.

Instantly, the same demented thought seemed to enter all four ranger's heads. He should be punished for doing this to us. He could be walking, yet we were paying the price for his weakness. When I rotated off carrying him, I took his rucksack from his chest and put it on my chest, so that I carried my ruck on my back and hugged his in reverse on my chest. This lightened the load on the litter significantly. I walked just behind them as they stumbled their way through the woods.

After the ranger had fallen, they picked him up and began walking again, but within ten yards, his head and shoulders suddenly slammed into the ground again. This time, it wasn't a slip. It was intentional. Again and again, he was slammed down as punishment for the burden he had created. He began to quietly sob, and it occurred to me how primal we were behaving. He had brought pain on the tribe, and that demanded justice.

It took over an hour to make our way to the patrol base. The ranger on the litter was crying when we lay him down on the ground and unbuckled the straps. The RIs quickly pulled him out of the platoon and took him away into the woods with them.

We never saw him again.

The RIs gave us enough time to set security, but that's it. Then they returned. "Get those boots off, rangers. Foot check. Let's go!" one of them announced.

I assumed they knew that most of us were asleep, so they made a loud entry into our presence to abruptly wake us. I sat up and began unlacing my boots. The leather was soggy and cold. Since all of my clothes had been drenched in the gully, I had no dry socks left. My feet were wet and pruned. My toes and the bottoms of my feet were pink and wrinkly. I could no longer feel either of my big toes. They were completely numb and had been for a couple of days. After peeling my socks off, I wrung them out. Black water ran through my fingers as I twisted them. I already dreaded knowing that I'd have to put wet socks back on my feet. Taking them off wasn't so bad. But putting wet socks and boots back on was torture. What I'd give for dry socks.

The ranger sitting beside me carefully took his wet boots off, then he removed his Rocky Gore-Tex booties, and I could not believe what I saw. Underneath the booties, his socks were completely dry. Staring at his dry feet, I envied him. No, I coveted his Gore-Tex booties, and I wanted them as badly as I've ever wanted anything in my life.

I knew that they were allowed in ranger school, but they were expensive. I'd never owned a pair, so I figured I didn't need them to make it through. Underestimating the conditions, I chose not to buy a pair. Now, upon seeing his dry feet, I'd have paid any price for a pair. Suddenly, I had an idea. I looked around and saw that the RI was well down the line lecturing a student on using foot powder, so I spun around and dug through my rucksack. I quickly took inventory of my chow. I had some cheese and crackers in my trouser pockets and two MREs in my rucksack. It was all I had left. It was my last two days rations, but I figured we only had a couple of days left in the field anyway. Silently, I crafted my plan, and then it was time to go for it.

"You want to trade those Gore-Tex booties?" I asked.

“Yeah, right,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“No. Seriously, hear me out,” I said.

“For what? What could you trade for these?” he replied, holding the booties up.

It took me a minute to form the words. He looked at me like he knew there was nothing that I could offer worth trading. Maybe I had a tin of snuff left that I’d offer. Then I caught him completely by surprise. “I have two MREs left. I’ll trade both for those booties,” I said.

The shock on his face could not be disguised. “Two MREs?” he said. “You’d trade your food?”

It was a desperate move—he knew it, and I knew it. Since there was no way to buy and sell restful sleep, nothing was more valuable than food. Still, my wet dogs bothered me more than the wolf in my belly.

“You could eat until you are full now, and still have chow for the next couple of days,” I said, as convincingly as I could.

He thought long and hard. Then he picked the booties up and held them in his hands. He stared at them like Frodo and the ring. “I can’t, man. It’s gonna rain more, and I don’t want wet feet. I can’t do it.”

“Are you sure? Think about it. Two MREs,” I said again.

“You’re crazy for offering your chow, dude,” he said. “You won’t make it without any chow. Besides, I want to keep my feet dry. No, I can’t do it,” and that was it.

The RI reached down and grabbed my heel to inspect my foot. Without saying a word, he let go and moved to the next ranger. I wrung the nasty socks I’d been wearing out as best I could once again. Then I tied them to the straps on the outside of my ruck. *If we don’t get more rain, maybe they will dry hanging off my ruck*, I thought. I took out a clean wet pair of socks and struggled to stretch the wet cotton back over my wrinkled feet.

With foot check complete, we hastily began planning our next mission. The RIs seemed to have a sense of urgency. I guessed that we would begin moving soon, and I was right. We hadn’t slept more than two hours in three days, and most of us had lost our ability to focus. We had walked all night to Three Forks, then to this patrol base, and we were already planning the next mission. As we

discussed the route we'd take to the objective, a couple of the squad leaders zoned out. They just stared at the ground.

Once we started moving, we droned through the woods like mindless zombies. Those in leadership positions tried to keep the rest focused as best they could, but they were in a tough position. It was not lost on me that getting a patrol early on in the field problem, when everyone was more alert, had been a blessing.

We were moving west. That I could tell. After the mission at Three Forks, we'd moved along Frick Creek where we set up the patrol base. Upon leaving the patrol base, we walked a short distance toward Hawk Mountain, but then we turned south and now back toward Rich Mountain.

No one spoke, we simply trudged along following the man in front of us. Putting one foot in front of the other had become a burden. Every time we stopped for a map check, several rangers fell asleep while taking a knee. It was like we had crossed a line beyond which we became numb to pain. My brain grew foggy as if I were in a trance. Sounds became muffled, words incomprehensible, and then the world grew blurry, fuzzy.

"Lay down, rangers," the senior RI shouted.

"They are worthless. Too damn tired to function," he said to the RI standing beside him.

"Just lay the fuck down on the ground and sleep!" he shouted. "All of you. Now!"

The Long Walk Out

December 1992

It was daylight when I woke, but what day was it? How long had we been there? I felt as though I'd slept for several days, but I knew that couldn't be the case. Looking at my watch, I calculated that the RIs had let us sleep for about three hours. That was enough. Amazingly, I felt much better.

We continued to the objective and hit it just before midnight. The RIs then led us out to a road that looked vaguely familiar to me. I couldn't quite place where we were, but I knew I'd been there before. As we walked along the road, it began to rain again.

We rounded a curve on the ridge, and I could see a small building off the side of the road. I knew where we were: Winding Stair Gap.

And thus, we find ourselves where we began the story—walking down Winding Stair Gap in the pouring rain while carrying an M60 machine gun and with my feet torn up like hamburger meat. I was at a point where I thought I could no longer continue. Mental strength and force of will was no longer enough. My body had reached its limit.

The rain came in waves like sheets riding the wind, slamming into us. With our heads down, we trudged on like a long line of olive drab turtles under the heavy burden of our rucksacks. I tried walking on the sides of my feet, but soon that hurt too bad, so I tried walking pigeon-toed, but that didn't help. I tried everything I could think of, but nothing seemed to ease the pain. I limped along, expecting to collapse at any minute. Then we stopped.

I could hear a ranger talking in the road ahead. It was another squad. The tone was stern, but it didn't seem to be an RI. Then I thought I recognized the voice. Was it Doc Black?

"Pick them damn guns up, and let's go!" he said.

He was also in a support squad carrying the M60 machine guns. They had

stopped to change out who was carrying them. The guns now sat in the middle of the road, but no one would pick them up. The men just stared silently at them. Doc was the squad leader. An RI watched but did not intervene.

“We don’t have time to be jacking around. You men get them guns, and let’s go,” Doc said, but still no one moved.

“You sorry sons o’ bitches,” he said, and he draped the first gun around his neck. “Lazy fuckers,” he added, then he picked the second gun up and threw the strap over his head. Finally, he picked the third M60 up. Now, with over one hundred pounds in machine guns and an eighty-pound rucksack on his back, the skinny-legged little medic staggered down the road.

He could barely walk, and soon, he tripped and fell.

“Ranger, come back here,” the RI said, but Doc scrambled to his feet and continued on. “Ranger, stop I said.”

With that, the RI grabbed one of the guns from Doc. “Rangers, get your asses over here and take these machine guns. A reluctant ranger moved forward with his head down and took the gun. Then another and another.

“Let’s go, rangers,” the RI said. “Get moving.”

The ordeal in Doc’s squad had given me an opportunity to take a quick break. The distraction took my mind off the pain and misery for just long enough to make me think I could walk a little further. The pain did not abate, but my spirits were lifted when we made it to Hightower Church Road. From there, we turned left and staggered on. I looked intently for a long grassy field on the right side of the road. That would be Camp Wahsega. I’d attended 4-H camp there when I was in eighth grade. I tried to force my mind to wander, escape the pain with a distant memory.

It was 1982, and a young blonde-haired girl and I had hit it off instantly at 4-H camp. We met while swimming in the small lake in the center of the camp. By the second day, we were spending more and more time together. She suggested that we meet behind the cabins for a kiss that night. Her assertiveness was attractive. I was giddy all afternoon, as it would be only the second time I’d kissed a girl. Should I lean my head left or right? I practiced leaning in with no one watching. Do I close my eyes immediately or wait until she does? I was a wreck all day. That night, as her warm tongue mixed with mine inside our

mouths, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

The memory was just enough to get me through the final half mile or so, and then I saw it. The field extended for over one hundred yards. A streetlight dimly illuminated a softball diamond in one corner of the field. The pond was just beyond it. Then the road snaked, and we began uphill for a change. My feet did not slide in my boots as badly when walking uphill.

My spirits grew. We were in the home stretch. No amount of pain could stop me now. I knew exactly where I was. I could crawl to camp from there. As we passed the entrance to lower mountaineering, I knew it was only a few hundred yards, and finally, I saw the sign that read Camp Frank D. Merrill.

A rush of relief came flooding over me. I'd made it and was on the verge of tears. Mountain phase was over. Then, suddenly, it was as though a freight train of pain hit me. I'd been able to keep the overwhelming pain in my body at bay just long enough to get to Camp Merrill. That was the only thing that kept me from stopping on the side of the road and telling the RIs that I could not go on. I had pushed that pain back just enough to keep moving forward, but now that I had finished, I no longer needed to fight it. So I stopped resisting, and it hit me so hard that my knees almost buckled. My back throbbed, my feet burned, and my neck and arms ached. I wanted to lie down on the ground and curl up until it went away.

"Rangers," an RI said. "Fall into the barracks, drop your rucksacks, and get a shower. You've earned this one."

Several amens could be heard in the ranks.

"Hang on, rangers. Hey! Listen up," the RI said as we began to walk away. "At ease!" which is army speak for be quiet. "After you shower, do not put your boots back on. Medics will be coming through for a foot check."

I dropped my rucksack beside my bunk where my B bag lay with dry clothes. As gently as possible, I removed my boots, then peeled my socks off. The pain brought tears to my eyes. My feet were swollen with water blisters the size of silver dollars. I stripped naked and then carefully eased my foot into my shower shoes. When I limped into the shower, the floor was covered in black filthy water. Several rangers had gotten into the shower with their uniforms on. Now they were removing their clothes item by item and wringing them out. *That's a*

great idea, I thought, *but we're going to have to clean this shower before we leave, and I hope we don't stop the drains up.*

The warm water felt like liquid heaven flowing over my sore muscles. I stood for a long time, just letting it pound my scalp and run down my weary body. My legs were weak, and my ribs showed prominently beneath paper-thin skin. Each of us had sharp cheek bones and jaw lines, bony knees and elbows. Every one of us looked like a skeleton with a balloon pulled over it.

Back at my bunk, I sat down and waited for the foot check. Two young medics soon entered the barracks with medical kits. They made their way around the room, bed to bed, treating blisters for over an hour. When one of them finally got to me, he gasped at the sight of my feet. "I'm going to have to lance those and get the fluid out," he said.

"Do what you have to do," I said. "I just need them to heal as fast as possible."

"That's a lot of blisters," he said, raising his brow. "You're going to be sore tomorrow."

"Not much I can do about it," I replied.

He then began slicing holes in blister after blister and squeezing the fluid out. Lancing them didn't hurt, but my feet were sore to the touch, so I tried not to scream as he pressed each one with his thumb. "I'd sleep with my feet out from under the covers if I were you," he said. "You need to air them out. The sooner they dry up, the better."

That night, I lay back on a thin mattress that felt like heaven. I then pulled a sheet and wool blanket over myself and gently lay my head on a pillow. It was divine.

The next morning, I woke to the sound of an RI's voice. "Wake up, rangers. Let's go!"

I swung my body around to sit on the side of the bunk and looked down at my feet. They were red and swollen like balloons. I feared they might be infected. I'd had blisters before—never this bad, but I'd had blisters—and my feet had never swollen like this. I gingerly stretched a sock over each foot, but I could not get my boots on. My feet were so puffed up that they would not physically go into my boots. "Sergeant," I said, calling to the RI.

"Yeah, ranger. What do you need?"

“Sergeant, I got blisters on the walk out. The medic popped them last night, and now my feet are swollen so bad, they won’t fit in my boots,” I said, then carefully pulled my sock off to show him.

“Damn, ranger,” he said, grasping my foot by the heel to take a closer look. “You’re going to need bigger boots. Can you get your tennis shoes on?”

“I can try,” I said, then took my tennis shoes from my B bag.

I could not lace them up, but I could get my feet in them.

“Okay, ranger, come on. I’ll take you up to the PX to get some new boots,” the RI said.

There is a very small Post Exchange at Camp Frank D. Merrill. They only carry essentials, and fortunately for me, boots are essential. I could barely walk on my tender feet, but the RI was patient with me. “Take your time, ranger,” he said several times as I navigated the gravel road in pain.

“I know where it’s at,” I told the RI. “You don’t have to take me up there if you don’t want to.”

“You from here?” he asked.

“North Georgia,” I said.

“Well, I’ll take you just to make sure they let you in. Students don’t just pop into the PX here you know.”

“Okay,” I said and limped on.

“Ms. Jane,” the RI said to the lady at the counter as we entered, “this ranger needs a new pair of boots.”

“Okay, come with me, hun,” she said, and walked toward the back wall of the small building.

“All right, ranger. You know your way back. Once you get your boots, head straight back to the barracks.”

“Roger that, sergeant.”

“What size do you wear, honey?” she asked.

“Well, normally a ten and a half, but my feet are swollen. I have blisters.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said.

“Let’s try an eleven,” I suggested.

She went into the back and soon returned with an eleven. Gently, I tried to ease my right foot into the boot, but it hurt too much.

“We’d better try and eleven and a half,” I said.

“Okay,” she said and went to get the boots.

Once again, I tried the boots on, but they were too tight. “Ma’am, we’d better try a twelve,” I said.

“You sure?” she said.

“I’m positive. My feet are swollen and killing me,” I said.

I managed to get my feet into the twelves. “You don’t have a bottle of neatsfoot oil, do you?” I asked the lady, hoping to soften them up.

She snickered and said, “No honey. I wish I did, but you’ll just have to break them in a’walkin’.”

I paid the lady and began for the barracks. As I was slowly making my way back down the hill, I saw John walking toward the barracks with a mop in his hand. “What the heck happened to you?” he asked.

“I got blisters on the walk out last night. My feet were so swollen this morning, I couldn’t get my boots on. I had to buy bigger boots at the PX.”

“Man, I’m sorry, but the more important question is, did you pass your patrols?” he asked.

“Yeah. It sucked, but I made it through. You?”

“Yep, I’m moving on too, but I agree with you ranger. It sucked.” Then he paused and chuckled under his breath. “You know you’re in a lousy state when you’ll dip another man’s redip.”

“Dude, that’s disgusting. You didn’t!”

“Yes, I did. I was feeling lower than a snake’s belly and completely out of dip. Doc Black had a can full of redip, and he was willing to share.”

“Argh,” I said clenching my face. The thought of putting used dip in my mouth was disgusting enough, and even more so when it was someone else’s. My stomach lurched a little as I tried to push the thought out of my mind.

“How did Doc do?” I asked. “He’s in your company, right?”

“Yeah. He is. Doc got peered, but he passed,” John said.

“Peered? Doc?” I said surprised. Doc was a well-liked guy, not the type to be peered out.

“Yeah, he got pissed and went off on these three guys because they didn’t want to carry the M60s.”

“I heard an argument down the road when we stopped one time. I thought it was him going off, but peered?” I said, surprised that they’d do such a thing.

“Yeah, it pissed those guys off that he made them look bad in front of the RI, so they all ganged up and peered him. He’s just moving to another company. He’ll be fine,” John said.

“Cool. Well, I need to hobble my way back down to the barracks and help clean,” I said.

“Yeah, I’ve got to get back with this mop. Ours broke, so I had to go get another one from the RIs. Take care of them dogs,” he said and made for the barracks.

I had not walked another twenty meters when I heard another familiar voice. “Jimmy.”

I turned to see First Lieutenant Jamie Jarrard coming down the hill behind me. “Hey, Jamie,” I said, extending my hand. “I was wondering if I’d see you.”

“How you doing?” he asked, looking me over.

“I’ve been better, but I’ll make it,” I said. “My feet are jacked up, but I’m heading home for Christmas, so I’ll mend. I guess that’s going to save me actually. If I had to go to Florida right now, I don’t think I could walk good enough to make it.”

Jamie was an RI who I’d gone to college with. He and his twin brother Joe were both great friends of mine.

“I looked your record up. You’re in good shape with spot reports and patrols. Just keep doing what you’re doing, and you’ll be fine,” he said.

“Thanks. I was able to pick up a few major pluses by walking point,” I said.

“Yeah, you’re in good shape. Just take care of those feet, and you’ll breeze through Florida,” he said. “The worst is over.”

“Well, that’s good to know. If it got any worse than mountains, I don’t know that I could make it.”

Jamie laughed. “It doesn’t get much worse than mountain phase of ranger school. You need anything?”

“Yeah, a fillet steak dinner,” I said. “But I’ll settle for a Big Mac.”

He laughed. “When you get home for Christmas, you can eat all the steak dinners you want.”

Jamie walked me back to the barracks, and then we shook hands and parted ways. I hobbled around as we cleaned the barracks, then our weapons, and waited for the busses to arrive.

As we were cleaning our weapons, an RI entered the barracks. “Rangers, listen up. If I call your name, secure your gear and come with me.”

He then began calling out names of those who had not passed mountains—recycles. You could have heard a pin drop. One by one, as their names were called, they slowly rose with their eyes cast to the ground, secured their gear, and exited the building. Once all the names were called, the RI joined them outside and marched them down the road. Another RI soon appeared. “Okay, rangers, the busses are pulling in now. Get your shit together, and let’s go.”

Shouldering my ruck was extremely difficult. The soreness in my muscles was deep. With my ruck on my back, I took my B bag in one hand and my rifle in the other, then hobbled outside. We boarded the busses, and I found an empty seat. A heavy fog, much like the one that had greeted us when we had first arrived, hung in the trees. The busses slowly drove past the dining facility on the way out, and there, standing in a long line, were the recycles, forced to watch us drive away. I saw one of the lieutenants that I had trained with at Fort Rucker. He had been in Alpha Company with me at Fort Benning and desert phase, but he was peered after desert phase, so he moved to Bravo Company. It was the first time I’d seen him since desert. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he watched us roll by and out of the gate.

Christmas Break

December 1992

I do not recall a single minute of the drive from Dahlonega back to Fort Benning—not one. Once we arrived at Camp Rogers, we turned our weapons in and changed into civilian clothes. We were to report back on January 4, 1993. The guidance was clear. “Be back at 0700. Don’t be late, rangers. Do not be late!”

I took a taxi to the train station in Columbus, Georgia. My wife Lisa was at her mother’s house in Alexandria, Virginia, where we planned to spend Christmas break together. My mother-in-law had bought me a ticket in a sleeper car on the train, and that’s what I did—slept and rested my mangled feet.

Lisa and I had only been married for five months when I reported to ranger school. We met at college in January 1988. We dated throughout college, but Lisa took a semester off, so she graduated several months after me. While she was finishing her last semester in the fall of 1991, I reported to Fort Rucker. She graduated in December and I proposed over Christmas break. We were married in May 1992, and she moved to Fort Rucker to join me. I graduated flight school in September. From September until November, I was preparing for ranger school, which took a tremendous amount of time, so Lisa went to live with her father in Fayetteville, Georgia until I graduated, and we moved to our first duty station.

Lisa met me at Union Station in Old Town Alexandria. When she saw me, the look on her face reflected my haggard condition better than any mirror could have.

“Have you eaten?” she asked, noting the obvious weight I’d lost.

“I ate just about everything they had on that train,” I said. “Why?”

She shook her head with a concerned expression. “You’ve lost a lot of weight.”

“Well, they don’t exactly feed you in ranger school. They keep you on the

razor's edge between starvation and death," I said.

It felt somewhat odd to be free to make choices. For weeks we did exactly what we were told when we were told to do it. Something as simple as sleeping and eating when I wanted to felt liberating. The break was welcomed, but I knew it would be hard to go back after two weeks off.

We drove home, and for the first time, I saw myself in the mirror. My clothes hung on me like a scarecrow made of broomsticks. My shirt hung like a dress, and the waist of my pants was wrinkled from having to cinch my belt two holes further up than normal to keep them from falling down.

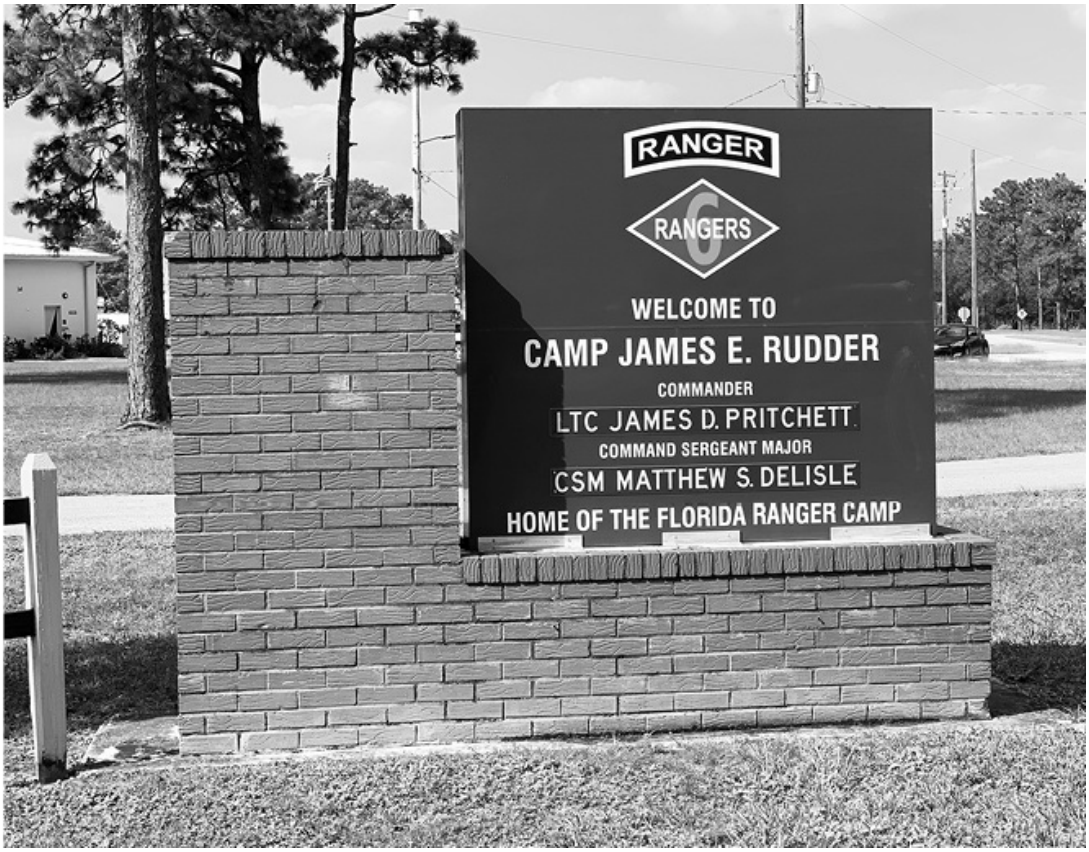
For the next two weeks, I nursed my feet back to good health while struggling to control my eating.

The extreme physical and mental stress of ranger school, combined with food and sleep deprivation, has a profound effect on the human body. A ranger student's metabolism slows down, and their body stores everything they consume. Because of this, many students put a lot of weight on in a short time after graduating. I wanted to return healthy, not bloated and fat.

I consumed a lot of calories, but I tried to make them count. I ate chicken and fish along with all the vegetables and fruit I wanted. The lanced blisters began to dry pretty quickly. Within a couple of days, I could walk in tennis shoes without limping, so I got out and walked each day. Lisa's mom and stepfather lived in Fairlington, a rather large neighborhood inside the beltway in Arlington, Virginia. Fairlington offers easy access to the Washington and Old Dominion Trail along Four Mile Run. I spent hours there, walking, and eventually jogging, to recover and prepare myself to go back.

Finally, the day came to return. Surprisingly, I was eager to return and get it over with. I knew Florida would present its own challenges, but I felt like the worst part was over. I said my goodbyes and boarded a train for Columbus.

Photo by the author



SWAMP PHASE

6th Ranger Training Battalion
Camp Rudder, Florida

Reptiles and Zodiacs

January 1993

“Raaannnger Blackmon,” a familiar voice called out from behind me.

I turned to see a vaguely familiar ranger student striding eagerly toward me. Clearly, he knew me, but I wasn’t sure who he was until he reached out to shake my hand, then pulled me in for a man hug. “John?” I asked. “Dude, I didn’t recognize you.”

He laughed. His once gaunt face was now full. “How was your Christmas break?” I asked.

“Awesome. Got to spend time with Pammie Sue, little Jackie, and my new baby boy Luke. How ‘bout you, man?”

“It was awesome. My feet were so torn up coming out of mountains, there’s no way I could have made it through Florida without some time to recover. Lisa and I just hung out at her mom’s house in northern Virginia. I ate a boatload of food and caught up on sleep,” I said.

John slapped his belly with both hands. “Me too, brother. I put some groceries away.”

I wondered if I had eaten enough over Christmas. John wasn’t fat, but he’d clearly put more weight back on than me. *Maybe I shouldn’t have been so careful not to overeat. Oh well. It’s too late now*, I thought.

“One more phase to go, and it’s over,” I said.

“One more phase to go,” he repeated. “Now, let’s knock this out, ranger.”

On the train ride back to Fort Benning, a part of me dreaded what lay ahead, but when I walked through the gate at Camp Rogers, I was somewhat excited. I was actually eager to get started and get it over with. While I knew Florida would suck, I was more confident than ever that I was going to earn a ranger tab is a few short weeks.

The Florida RIs wasted no time. They took accountability as we reported back

in. We then drew our equipment, and they told us to board the busses. It was strange to hear so much chatter on the ride to Camp Rudder. Usually, a chorus of snoring erupted by the time we were seated, but having been able to rest up over Christmas, students now spoke about what they had done over the break and where they would be going for their follow-on assignments. Everyone seemed to assume that they would blow right through swamp phase and graduate in less than three weeks, but the cold hard truth is that Florida phase was no different than the other phases. Some of us would make it through; others would not.

"You'll meet my buddy Sergeant First Class Kenny LaValley in Florida," John said as we sat down on the bus. "He's the reptile guy."

"How do you know him?"

"He was my squad leader when I was enlisted in Germany. We served together in 1-33 Armor," John said. "Great dude."

"Cool," I said but thought how weird it would be to actually *meet* an RI on friendly terms.

"Hey man, when we go in for the reptile show, you don't want to sit near the front. If it looks like that's going to happen, act like you've got to use the latrine or something. Try and get to the back of the room," he said.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Kenny said they make the reptile show as exciting as possible. Those sitting in the front will get more than they bargained for. He said he milks the poisonous snakes before the show, but he pretty much lets the snakes go. Just to get the juices flowing, so to speak."

"So, he lets the snakes crawl around the room?" I asked. "He doesn't hold them the whole time?"

"You know the deal. They gotta bring the excitement," John said. "Just pick a seat near the back if you can."

I had no intention of sitting near the front and risking getting bitten by a snake, venom-drained or not. That would be a terrible end to ranger school for anyone, and I'd end up having nightmares about snakes for the rest of my life—join the army and get PTSD from a snakebite versus combat. No thanks. I resolved to sit as far in the back as I could.

Camp Rudder is located on Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. It's named for

Major General James E. Rudder who commanded 2nd Ranger Battalion when his elite rangers scaled the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc, France, during the 1944 D-Day invasion. Their mission was later memorialized in the epic movie *The Longest Day*.

Each phase has its unique challenges, but swamp phase can be particularly dangerous, especially in winter. Students are wet throughout this phase of training. The cold water, coupled with rapidly changing weather conditions, has taken the lives of several ranger students over the years. Hypothermia is a very real concern in Florida, but my own personal concerns lay elsewhere. There are two things in this world that I really dislike—snakes and the ocean. Snakes are self-explanatory, and as for the ocean, well, as I see it, when a man is knee-deep in the ocean, he enters the food chain. I've never liked being in the water with things that can eat me.

After a four-hour drive, we pulled into camp. There was a large ranger tab at the gate with a sign underneath that read, "Welcome to Camp James E. Rudder, Home of the 6th Ranger Training Battalion." Up until that point, everything had seemed somewhat surreal. It didn't feel like I was back in ranger school. But as I read the sign and felt the bus buck to a stop, it was as though the switch was flipped. Welcome back to hell.

We filed off the busses, and the RIs pointed the way to the open-bay barracks, where we each chose a bunk and placed our gear. That first afternoon was uneventful. The RIs were relatively relaxed. We were in bed by 2100 hours without any screaming, yelling, or hazing. I recalled Fred telling me that even his dad, who went through the course twenty-five years prior, had focused on mountain phase when giving advice. Dahlonega seemed to be the greatest of all tests. The challenges of Florida are considerably different, to say the least. Even though students are in the water all the time, Florida is flat, so with decent moonlight, students can move relatively quickly to the objectives. Fred had also told me that the RIs didn't mess with his class too much in Florida. They just let the fatigue, hunger, and swamp do its thing.

The RIs woke us the next morning around 0500 by turning the lights on. "Let's go, rangers," was all the RI had to say.

Almost without thought, we all rolled out of our bunks, took a leak, brushed

our teeth, and drug a razer across our faces. Once dressed, we formed up outside the barracks and marched to breakfast. I assumed that our first day in Florida would consist of classes on patrolling in the swamp, which was accurate, but the classes would come after the reptile show.

Again, without being told, we ate quickly, those who dipped stuffed their lips with snuff, and we formed up. We marched over to a small pond adjacent to a tall tin-roof building.

The reptile demonstration, or "show" as it is dubbed, is well known among rangers. The collection of snakes at 6th RTB is extensive, but perhaps the most famous reptile there was not a snake at all. It was Big John. Big John was a twelve-foot-long alligator that lived in the pond just outside the reptile house. That's where the show began.

Photo by author

We gathered around the fence, and an RI soon emerged from the building with a live chicken in his hands. He told us all about Big John, and then he warned us that John had an extensive family that lived throughout the swamps in which we would be patrolling. Then he threw the chicken into the water. It landed with a splash. Since chickens do not have webbed feet, the bird struggled to try and swim. It sort of cupped its wings, holding them out away from its body to try and remain upright in the water. It was January, so Big John was slow to move, but eventually, the activity on the water's surface was more than he could stand, so he decided to have a snack.

Eager to see, rangers moved closer to the chain-link fence that surrounded the pond. Big John had been lying on the bottom of the pond when we arrived, but

now with the agitated chicken on the surface, he slowly rose. With his head now partially out of the water, he moved in for the kill. All we saw was a flash of white when his mouth opened. A few feathers flew as his vice-like jaws slammed shut like a steel trap. He threw his head back, opened his mouth again to reposition the chicken inside his mouth. Then he swallowed. Satisfied, Big John slowly sank back down to the bottom of the pond.

"Great, now let's go wade in the swamp for two weeks," a student said sarcastically.

"They don't eat you right away, you know," another ranger said. "They pull you under and drown you, then stuff you under the bank or a log to let you rot a little. They like to soften the meat up a bit."

There were several nervous giggles as we left the pond.

As we filed into the classroom, I remembered John's advice not to sit up front, but as I expected, everyone was filling the seats row by row. I decided to risk it and just sit where I wanted to. The RIs were still outside the building anyway, so they would not see me. I chose a chair near the back in the center aisle. *Friggin' snakes*, I thought to myself. *I hate snakes*.

In addition to the standard food and sleep deprivation, Florida added a new dimension—hostile wildlife. Instead of just facing the risk of nodding off, getting lost, borderline starvation, and so on, there was now a very real possibility that Mother Nature, or some swamp creature, would make a serious and direct attempt to kill us.

Photo by the author

The alligator that now occupies Big John's pond.

The room was large with two sections of chairs. There was an aisle down the center and a section against both walls. Two lunchroom tables were butted up against one another at the front of the room. Once we were all seated, Sergeant LaValley walked out from backstage with a giant snake draped around his neck and shoulders. It was a Burmese python that must have been ten feet long. It was clear that he wanted to get our attention from the start, and it worked. Several rangers near the front half stood when he walked out with the snake around his neck, suggesting they might run to the back of the room. Apparently, I was not the only one that did not like snakes.

Sergeant LaValley told us all about the python's natural habitat, what it eats, how it kills, how big it can get, and so forth. When he finished, he lay the snake on the table at the front of the room and went back into the back to get another one. Several students near the front got up out of their chairs and moved to the side of the room while he was gone.

He returned with a yellow boa constrictor. "What's wrong, rangers?" he asked the men now standing against the wall.

"Don't like snakes, sergeant," one of the rangers said.

Sergeant LaValley rolled his eyes and shook his head. As he discussed the boa and other non-native Florida constrictors, the python slowly slithered around the

table and then dropped off onto the floor. Sergeant LaValley acted as if he didn't notice or care.

"There are a surprising number of exotic snakes in Florida because a lot of people buy them as pets and then end up letting them go in the wild," he said.

He placed the boa on the table and, once again, went to the back. Sergeant LaValley continued explaining snake after snake until there were four or five snakes out at once. While I didn't want to hold or touch one, the constrictors didn't bother me nearly as much as the venomous ones. They, of course, were next.

Having shown us all the constrictors, he picked the snakes up, draped them around his body, and took them to the back. He returned with a small snake. Its body was colored in bands of red, black, and yellow. I recognized it immediately as a coral snake.

"The coral snake has the most toxic venom of any snake in Florida," he said. "However, it has small, fixed fangs. They can't retract them into their mouths. They have to chew or nick you with their fangs. They don't strike. So, despite having the most toxic venom, they rarely kill people."

I had heard about coral snakes throughout my life, but I'd never actually seen one. We have king snakes in Georgia, which look like coral snakes, but the colorful bands are in a different order. It's easy to remember the little saying that helps to differentiate the two snakes. Red and yellow, kill a fellow—coral snake. Red and black, friend of Jack—king snake. Unlike vipers, the coral snake doesn't have the familiar diamond-shaped head either. Their noses are rounded. Its head actually looks like a big worm.

A nasty, sneaky worm that can kill a man with one bite. And they'd be in the swamps with us.

Sergeant LaValley lay the coral snake on the table. Then he took the snake-handling stick in his hand and began agitating it. The coral snake was only about twenty inches long, but it raised perhaps half its body up off the table and opened its mouth wide. Then the snake began swaying back and forth, much like a cobra when it dances to music. Sergeant LaValley explained that its fangs were exposed with its mouth open. If its fangs nicked a person and broke the skin, the poison would be released.

I noticed that Sergeant LaValley did not play around with the coral snake for too long. After he finished telling us about it, he immediately took it to the back. He returned with a western diamondback rattlesnake. Then he retrieved a huge eastern diamondback. “The eastern diamondback rattlesnake is the largest and most dangerous venomous snake in North America,” he said. “Its fangs can be up to one inch in length, and it can pump a lot of venom into its victim.”

Next, he brought out a pine rattler, which he said had bitten more ranger students than any other. “They crawl up under rucksacks when rangers are in the patrol base,” he said. “Then they bite you on the hand when you pick your ruck up. Always check under your rucksack, rangers.”

As he went on about the pine rattler, both the eastern and western diamondbacks fell off the table and began slowly crawling toward us. He lay the pine rattler on the table, and instead of picking the other two up, he went to the back. As the two rattlesnakes neared the front row, ranger students stood to give them a wide berth. Soon, the first three rows of rangers were all standing, and some students began yelling for Sergeant LaValley, who had still not returned. I now saw why John had told me not to sit up front. The two snakes, now agitated at the screaming students, coiled up and began rattling their tails. They separated the ranger students like Moses parting the Red Sea.

Eventually, Sergeant LaValley returned to save the day. He hooked them with his stick and drug them back to the front of the class, but since each snake was poisonous, it took him a while to pin each one down and grasp it by the head so as not to get bitten in the process. While he worked on catching one, the other snakes continued crawling around the room, sending rangers in every direction. Needless to say, the reptile show lived up to the hype.

That afternoon and the following morning, the RIs presented classes on patrolling in swamps. We then went on practice patrols, with the RIs teaching as we went. Our feet were wet most of the day, but they didn’t put us in the water fully until the third day. That’s when Zodiak training began.

The Zodiak, or Combat Rubber Raiding Craft (CRRC) is a rubber raft used by the armed forces for waterborne missions. The Zodiak is fifteen and a half feet long and just over six feet wide. It can accommodate ten rangers. Each boat has a designated coxswain who sits at the back of the boat. The coxswain is the boat

commander. He controls the rudder and gives orders to keep everyone rowing in sync.

On the first day of Zodiak training, the RIs taught us how to properly row and maneuver the boat. Each of us got a turn as coxswain. Theoretically, it should be relatively easy for ten men to row a boat in a synchronized fashion. It's not.

Photo by Sgt. Austin Berner/released

The coxswain would give the command to, "Give way together," which meant for each of us to row at the same time and effort level, yet the boat would go sideways, or worse yet, spin. Giving way together turned out to be the most difficult task we performed that day. It would clearly take time and a lot of practice to get to the point where every oar entered the water at the same time and the effort of all ten strokes was relatively the same.

The second day was a different story altogether. Day two was capsizing drills. Capsizing drills consist of purposefully turning the boat over in the water and then practicing flipping it back over and remounting. The Zodiak weighs approximately 300 pounds, so flipping it over is not an easy task, particularly if you have never done it before, which none of us had.

We spent that entire day chest-deep in swamp water. The RIs could not seem to get enough. Of course, they told us that capsize drills were for our own safety, but we knew it would take a hell of a wave to turn a Zodiak over with ten rangers and their gear inside. Ten rangers with all their gear plus the boat had to weigh over 3,000 pounds. Still, they wanted to be sure. So, we capsized, then we struggled to turn the boat back over and remount it. Then we did that over again and again. Those who were not capsizing stood chest-deep in freezing swamp

water and watched the others while they awaited their next turn. I leaned against a tree and shivered for hours that day.

The following morning, word spread throughout our class that two of our ranger buddies were gone and would not be returning. Two Navy SEALs got a buddy who was stationed at Eglin to stash McDonald's meals in a predetermined hiding place. During the night, they snuck out of the barracks for some midnight chow. An RI had saw and followed. As a result, they were removed from the course.

I was surprised that they would risk it so close to the end. We had just returned from Christmas break. None of us were starving like we had been after mountains, so why take a chance? Still, it was a reminder that there was zero tolerance for breaking the rules. We never saw them again.

The day for the field problem finally arrived. I was eager to start patrolling and get it over with. We were supposed to be inserted into the swamp in UH-1 Huey helicopters, but as fate would have it, the weather did not cooperate. I was disappointed, because flight school students from Fort Rucker, Alabama fly the mission, and they go to extremes to prepare treats for the students. The flight school students make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, brownies, and fudge for the ranger students. Students can eat all they want while they are on the bird, but once they land, they cannot have any chow on them. It's an awesome tradition, but due to low ceilings and rain, we'd be riding in trucks instead of helicopters. I suppose I would have been much more disappointed had we not had Christmas break prior to Florida.

The driver stopped the truck on the side of a dirt road, and we bailed out. For the next week, we would walk, usually chest-deep, in swamp water. The putrid smell of the still water decomposing everything beneath its surface hung thick in the air. Knee-high cypress stumps, submerged under the water, took a toll on our shins and knees. They were impossible to see at night, so we walked until a ranger slammed his shin into one, gasped in pain, then passed word back. "Stump, watch out."

Since some of the water was unpotable, the RIs took us to specific creeks to fill our canteens with potable water, but the iodine tablets mixed with swamp water tasted horrible. Our faces contorted like we were sucking pickles with

every swallow.

I received a platoon leader position on day four. “Ranger Blackmon,” the RI said.

“Yes, sergeant.”

“Your job is to move the patrol from the ORP to the patrol base and set it up,” he said. “Here are the grid coordinates.”

The RI handed me a piece of paper with an eight-digit grid coordinate. Then he walked away. *That’s it?* I thought. *Okay, I’ll take it.*

It was a relatively straightforward mission—in fact, about as easy as it gets. I gathered the squad leaders together, explained the route we’d take to the patrol base, and we moved out. Walking in waist-deep water for much of the way, we didn’t move very fast, but all in all, the movement was uneventful. Once we arrived at the patrol base, I gave instructions for where we’d set the perimeter up. We then established security and began patrol base operations. To my knowledge, the RI didn’t come back into the perimeter until the following morning.

Thirty minutes before daylight, I eased around the perimeter to make sure that everyone was awake for stand to. Since that’s when the enemy is most likely to attack, we went to 100 percent security, every man at the ready. About a half hour after daylight, the RI returned.

“Ranger Blackmon, come with me,” he said.

I nervously followed him outside the perimeter. RI feedback always seemed to make me nervous. I knew he wasn’t going to tell me if I passed or failed, but I’d carefully analyze every word he said to try and guess if I’d passed or not. He held my future in his hands, yet he’d only hint at the quality of my performance.

The RI led me to a large fallen tree. “How do you think you did?” he asked as he sat on the tree and pointed for me to sit as well.

“Well, sergeant, it was pretty straightforward. If I screwed this up, I’ve got bigger problems,” I said.

He snickered a little. “Yeah, well, I suppose you’re right.”

“Once it was daylight, we had to adjust a few things, but we set the patrol base up and conducted our priorities of work,” I said.

“Yes, ranger. You did. Do you have any questions of me?” he asked.

“No, sergeant. I don’t think so. I assume I passed?” I asked, pushing my luck.

“Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves,” he said. “But you did do your mission.”

I took that as a hint.

The RIs began to rotate leadership positions more frequently. It was clear that they were trying to give us as many opportunities as possible to receive a GO on a patrol. For the first time since we had begun the course, the RIs seemed to actually want us to get our tabs. However, this meant that we spent less and less time in patrol bases. The RIs kept us moving, so the lack of sleep quickly began to take its toll. Hunger returned with a vengeance as well, and that created a serious problem the second week.

We conducted a raid around 0300 hours one morning. We then walked a short distance to set up a patrol base. By that point, everyone was tired, so we hastily set up the perimeter, then began the rest plan. The patrol leader, platoon sergeant, and squad leaders walked the perimeter constantly, trying to keep us awake, but we’d spent very little time in a patrol base for three straight days. Having only gotten short naps here and there, it was near impossible to keep rangers awake.

At first light, one of the RIs paid us a visit. He seemed to understand the situation. He knew that we’d set the patrol base up haphazardly, so he calmly instructed the patrol leader to improve our position now that it was daylight. Then he departed. About ten minutes later, it began.

“Somebody stole my chow!” a ranger student said aloud. He was on his knees frantically digging through his rucksack. “Which one of you motherfuckers stole my chow?”

He spoke loud enough for everyone in the patrol base to hear, but low enough that the RI hopefully did not. “I had two ham slices in my ruck. One is gone. Who the fuck stole my chow?” he said.

“You sure it’s not in another pouch?” a ranger lying near him asked.

“Hell no. I’ve looked everywhere. It’s gone. Some lowlife motherfucker stole it.”

“Sure, you didn’t eat it or drop it somewhere?” another ranger whispered loudly.

“I know what the fuck I had. I saved two ham slices, and now, one’s gone,” he said.

There are few things in the world worse than a chow thief. We were all hungry and tired. To steal food from a fellow ranger is about as low as it gets. You can fall asleep on another ranger’s patrol. He may be pissed at you, but everyone understands. It happens. You can get lost and never find the objective. Again, it happens, but stealing another ranger’s chow breaks the code.

“The only time I didn’t have my ruck was during the assault. Who stayed back in the ORP?” the ranger asked. “Was it Handly? Handly, did you stay in the ORP?”

“I didn’t steal your chow, man” Handly said.

“If I find out it was you, I will beat your ass,” he said, still rummaging through his rucksack.

“Like I said, I didn’t steal your chow.”

“Shut the hell up,” the patrol leader said. “RIs are coming, and I need a GO on this patrol.”

On any normal day, a ranger would share his chow with another, but ranger school was different. We each had been issued just enough food to keep us alive. Every precious calorie was essential to enabling us to keep functioning. Stealing a man’s food crossed the line unlike anything we could have done to one another. And because we were so broken down, it brought out the primal side of us—food meant survival, and a man will fight to survive.

We began movement just before dark, and within minutes, we were chest-deep in water. There was no visible moon, so the swamp water was black as oil. I’d learned to lead with my toe as I walked, so if I hit a cypress stump it was with my boot and not my shin.

I was the third man in line as we made our way through the murky water. As we moved along, I noticed that one of the RIs had positioned himself near the front of the patrol. Typically, the RIs walked in back. He was right behind the point man, who he seemed to be watching closely. We’d been walking for over an hour and the water was chest deep. Suddenly, the point man disappeared into the water. It was like he walked off the edge of the world.

The RI quickly reached for the student’s ruck. Grasping the cinch straps on his

rucksack, the RI pulled the thrashing ranger back to the surface. The student emerged from the water wild-eyed and gasping for air. “Shit!” he said, once he got a breath.

The RI seemed unexcited. Just another day at the office. “Okay, we found the river,” he said matter-of-factly. “We’ll be conducting a river crossing right here, rangers. So bring the rope up.”

In both mountains and swamps, one ranger was selected to carry a 120-foot-long rappelling rope, which we called a green line. One ranger whispered to another, passing word back through the patrol, “Bring the rope forward.”

Soon a ranger student made his way to the front of the patrol with the rope.

“Which one of you rangers is the strongest swimmer?” the RI asked.

No one spoke.

“Which one of you can swim, damnit?” he demanded.

None of us had done a river crossing in a swamp before. Standing on the edge of a riverbank that was beneath the surface of the water, I wondered how difficult it would be to find the far bank. Whomever swam across would have to feel for it under the water, and it was so dark, we could not see where the far side might be. Too many unknowns for a volunteer, I suppose.

“I’m not asking again.”

“I’ll do it,” one of the students finally said.

“Okay, ranger, take your gear off.”

The RI then tied a loop in the end of the rope and attached a snap link. Years prior, the procedure was to tie a bowline around the swimmer’s waist, but a student had drowned because he could not get the rope off. The current had been strong that night, so the student was washed downstream. The rope became entangled in brush and wrapped around a log. When the students pulled the rope, attempting to pull him back to safety, they actually pulled him under water on the other side of the log. He was unable to get the knot untied and drowned. The snap link was meant to enable him to quickly detach himself from the rope should he need to get loose.

The RI put the rope around the student’s waist and pointed across the river. “Swim over there and find a tree on the other bank, ranger. Tie a bowline to the tree, and we’ll come across.”

“Roger, sergeant,” the student said, then lunged forward into the water and began breast-stroking slowly across the river.

As the ranger swam, we let the rope slip through our hands, so as not to restrict his ability to swim. He made it to the far bank and looked at several trees before selecting one and securing the rope with a bowline.

“Okay, rangers, let’s get this rope secure on this side,” the RI said.

We picked a tree on our side, tied a wireman’s knot in the rope, and looped it around the tree. Five of us pulled and pulled until the rope was tight. The RI then stood at the base of the tree and instructed us to begin crossing. “No more than two on the rope at a time,” he instructed. “Too much weight and the rope will sag, and we’ll never get across.”

It took the better part of two hours to get the entire patrol to the other side of the river and the rope back across. The river was only about twenty meters wide, but getting thirty rangers across a submerged river, one at a time, on a rope, with all of their gear, does not happen fast.

The last ranger to cross untied the rope from the tree, and we pulled him across. Once everyone was across the river, the RI changed out our leadership positions again. I was surprised that I was once again selected to be the patrol leader. I thought I was tabbed out, so I did not expect to get another leadership position.

Because the river crossing had taken so much time, we hit the objective later than normal. By the time we made it to the patrol base, it had been daylight for hours. We hastily set the patrol base up and began our priorities of work. As I made my way around the perimeter, I realized how tired everyone was. Most rangers were getting that one-hundred-mile stare in their eyes. I decided that I would just let them sleep. It was risky, but the rangers needed rest, and I was confident that I could afford to get a NO-GO on the patrol and still tab out.

I pulled the squad leaders into the middle of the patrol base and told them to let everyone go to sleep. “What?” one of the squad leaders said, surprised.

“Let them go to sleep,” I said. “I think that’s why they made me the patrol leader. I can afford to fail this patrol.”

“What about me?” a squad leader asked.

“Do you need to pass this to tab out?”

“I don’t think so, but I don’t know for sure,” he said.

“No one knows for sure. But I know we need rest, and I think the RIs are giving us an opportunity here. They disappeared the second we got here. Just get everyone in position. Make sure the patrol base is decent, and then let them fall asleep. Don’t worry about range cards or anything like that.”

Apprehensively, they nodded in agreement and returned to their squads.

I was awakened by a boot to my ribs. It wasn’t hard, but it got my attention. “Ranger!” the RI said. “Wake your ass up.”

He kicked me again. “What the fuck, ranger? Every fucker in this platoon is asleep. You didn’t dig in. Hell, you didn’t do shit.”

Here go the theatrics, I thought. *This may leave a mark.*

“Ranger, you are a fucking NO-GO!”

Well, that was pretty clear. I’d never been told that I passed, but he had made it clear that I did not pass this one. The RI then walked to the center of the patrol base and shouted, “Rangers, get your asses in here. Everyone to the center of the patrol base.”

Everyone quickly gathered around him. He then began calling out names and assigning new leadership positions. It was over. He didn’t even pull me aside to debrief my actions as patrol leader. He made it very clear that I had failed the patrol, so there wasn’t much else to talk about. Still, I figured I would score pretty well on the peer evaluations. The men thoroughly enjoyed the rest.

Once the new leadership was in place, the RI gave the new patrol leader very clear guidance. “Fix this fucking abortion of a patrol base right now!” Then he turned and walked away.

As we neared the end of the phase, leadership positions changed even more rapidly. The RIs would make assignments in the morning at RI changeover. Those students would plan the next mission and brief it, then the RIs would change the leadership out again. We would depart the patrol base, and halfway to the objective, they would stop us and change positions yet again. That crew would get us to the ORP and conduct the leader’s reconnaissance, then they’d change us out for the raid.

One morning, we were lying in the patrol base and an RI announced.

“Rangers, it’s Sunday, so everyone that wants to go to a church service can do so. We only have one service though, and it’s Protestant, so if you want to go, leave your rucks where they are and come with me.”

Religious or not, most every ranger chose to go because religious services were usually a good opportunity to sleep. Catholics and Protestants alike marched down a trail to the river’s edge. There, on a sandy shore, stood a man in green fatigue pants and a sweater with a Bible in his hand.

Once we were seated on the riverbank, the RIs vanished into the swamp, and the preacher began. He told us he had gone through ranger school years prior. Then he gently smiled and asked, “Have any of you hallucinated?” as if we were going to share a secret together.

Several rangers raised their hands. “When I went through, I did too,” he said. “I remember droning along on a patrol. I looked at a tree and saw ice cream cones hanging like leaves from the branches. When the RI woke me up, I was licking the air.”

Several rangers laughed. “Hunger and fatigue, rangers. Hunger and fatigue will do strange things to a man’s mind,” he concluded.

I expected him to capitalize on the setting. I figured we would sing “Shall We Gather at the River,” and he’d preach about John the Baptist at the river Jordan, but he didn’t. Instead, he spoke about perseverance and trust in the Lord. “When times are hard, we have someone we can always rely on,” he said. “The Lord is always there for us.”

Each of us struggled to remain awake, but that didn’t seem to bother the preacher. He carried on with his message despite heavy eyes and rangers spitting tobacco juice between their feet. Having worn only our BDUs to the service, it wasn’t long before we were cold. A ranger sitting beside me began to shiver visibly. He had that bluish hue around his mouth and his bottom lip quivered uncontrollably. The preacher noticed this ranger, so mid-sentence, he grasped his sweater at the waist and skinned it up and off of his torso. When he came down, he brought the sweater right down over the shivering ranger’s head. In one fell swoop, he had peeled the sweater off himself and put it on the student. “There, ranger,” he said. “That ought to warm you up.”

The preacher spoke for about half an hour, and then we mumbled our way

through an old gospel hymn. After the song, the preacher offered a prayer. He invoked the powers of heaven to bless and look after each of us, and then, on cue, the RIs reappeared and led us back to the patrol base.

We all knew that the last mission would be the assault on Santa Rosa Island. I had lost track of the days, but I knew we had to be nearing the end. It seemed like we had been in the swamp for two weeks. We had gone to church on Sunday, so that was January 17. We were in the third week of January. *As long as I pass, graduation will be this week*, I thought.

That afternoon I nervously anticipated the RIs assigning leadership positions. I reasoned that if I wasn't given a leadership position it meant I had tabbed out. Surely, they would not put me in a position unless I had to get a GO to graduate.

The RI walked into the patrol base around noon and made the leadership changes. My name was not called. But what if one passing patrol would not be enough for me? If I needed two GOs, they probably would not give me a patrol either. Only those who needed one passing patrol should get a position. All this made my head hurt. Still, I went over and over my patrols in my mind. Had I passed? Was I tabbed out? I'd have to wait and see.

Sure enough, our next mission took us due south to the sound. That afternoon, we walked through pine trees, and I noticed that the water was soon only ankle-deep, and then we walked on dry ground. I could hear cars in the distance on a road. Soon we stopped, and the patrol leader sent word back that we were going to cross a danger area—a highway.

Security was sent down the road in both directions, and then we began crossing, one man at a time. Stealthily, each man would ease forward to the side of the road. When it was his turn, he'd sprint across the road. Sprint being a loose term. We each ran as fast as a man with a seventy-pound rucksack and M16 can run. Our crossing was interrupted multiple times by cars on the highway. When my turn came, I looked both directions, and I could see RIs standing in the road. I chuckled involuntarily. Why not just stop traffic and let all of us walk across?

Once everyone was across the road, we walked a short distance to the shoreline, where we discovered a long line of Zodiaks waiting on us. We were

there well before dark, so the RIs told us to set up a perimeter. Then, to my surprise, the RIs changed the leadership out. Once again, the stress and anticipation returned, and yet again, my name was not called. With new leadership in place, the RI issued the order for the final raid on Santa Rosa Island. Once it was planned and briefed to all the rangers, all that remained was to wait until dark.

As darkness settled on the swamp, we quietly moved to the Zodiaks. I took my position halfway down the right side of the boat. We straddled the side of the craft with one leg inside the boat and the other out, boot submerged in the water. One by one, the boats shoved off and we began paddling.

At this point, the most frustrating role in ranger school was that of coxswain. Rangers on the right side paddled harder than those on the left, so we turned left. Then the rangers on the right backed off too much, so we turned right. Boats spun right, then left, up and down the beachline as coxswains gave orders to try and synchronize our rowing.

“Rangers, it’s pretty simple,” the RI in our boat calmly said. “All you have to do is give way together. Simply work as one.”

Isn’t that the key to getting through ranger school? It’s just that simple. Teamwork. And that would be the key to success when I got to my next duty station and led a platoon. It would be my job as the leader to play the role of coxswain. Simply give way together.

Eventually, the coxswains got us semi-synchronized, so the boats spun less. Still, they moved at an angle, right then left. So we moved out into the sound like a water moccasin crossing a lake. We were probably halfway to the island before we truly got the hang of it and straightened out. But eventually, with practice, our oars began to move as one, and we glided almost effortlessly across the water’s surface.

The water was calmer and quieter farther out. Moonlight reflected off the ocean, illuminating a long line of boats slowly making progress toward the island, which could also be seen in the distance. It did not look too awfully far away. In fact, I thought we’d be there within the hour.

I was wrong. We rowed and rowed and rowed, and the island seemed to not be getting closer. After rowing several hours, my arms began to ache, then my

back. And then, panic-stricken, I felt the need to defecate. *No*, I thought. *I've made it this far. I certainly can't go in this boat, so I'll just have to hold it. Maybe the urge will pass.*

Around midnight, I realized we were going to make it. The island began to get larger, and soon, we were there. The RI instructed us to pull the Zodiak up onto the beach, which we did, and then we began movement to the objective. The urge to relieve myself had somewhat dissipated, until I began walking. Then it returned. *Why now?* I thought. *I can't stop the patrol and ask to take a crap. Just hold it.*

We made it to the ORP just before first light. There were several enemy forces standing around a large bonfire on the objective. For the final time, we moved forward and got into position for a raid. It occurred to me that I had made it. As long as I passed, this was it.

I was on the assault force. We crawled up fairly close to the objective on line and waited. The signal was given, and the M60s opened fire. A green star cluster shot into the air, and we began moving forward. The enemy resisted more than normal. They ran around on the object and shot back for several minutes. Then another star cluster fired, and then another. And the machine guns cackled on and on. This was different.

Normally, the machine guns only fired for about a minute before lifting fire, but they just kept shooting and shooting, and why three star clusters?

Eventually, we were ordered to assault through the objective, so we began bounding forward. Rangers ran with renewed enthusiasm. Each ranger tried to shoot every single round he carried. There was no next mission, so no need to keep and carry bullets. A grenade simulator exploded near me, then another. Down the line, another. The RIs were using up all of the pyrotechnics.

Finally, the enemy all lay dead on the objective, and we knelt on the far side. Suddenly, an RI shouted, "ENDEX!"

End of exercise. A rush of relief flooded my body. It was as though the entire platoon let loose with an audible exhale. I even heard a couple of "hell yeah" and a "thank God" or two. November 2 seemed like a lifetime ago. All we'd known for months was mission after mission in ever-changing, yet consistently miserable, conditions.

Ranger school was now over, but I still had one more very important mission to accomplish. I could not hold it any longer. The RIs told us to inventory of all the equipment. “Lay everything out, rangers. Make sure *everything* is accounted for.”

With that, I turned to my ranger buddy and said, “I’ll be right back.”

“Where you going?” he asked.

“I’ve got to take a crap,” I said, “I can’t hold it any longer.”

“Okay. But hurry up.”

I eased through the dunes and found a spot to hide. I then dropped my trousers and attempted to do my business, but nothing came except pain. *What the heck?* I thought. *I am about to explode.* This was not the result I had expected.

I pushed and strained, and it only hurt worse. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead. I felt as though I was trying to give birth to a giant redwood. With each strain, the pain increased. I was now covered in sweat. I’d push, then quickly stop because I was being ripped apart from within. I cursed MRE cheese and peanut butter. They did this to me. They stopped me up!

It would have been so much easier sitting on a toilet. If I could have just held it a while longer. Instead, there I was squatting on an island behind a sand dune with no tree to hold onto. In a wooded area, I would hold to a tree while leaning back, but with no trees, I was forced to squat, which meant that after a few minutes, my knees began to ache. Now, with stomach pains, an aching backside, and knees that felt like they might explode, I pushed and strained and cursed for all I was worth, and finally, sweet success. I accomplished the mission at hand.

When I returned, the other rangers were already putting their rucksacks back on. I quickly shouldered mine and joined them.

“Rangers,” the senior RI announced. Then he pointed. “Those trucks right over there are your ride back to Camp Rudder.”

That’s all it took. We made a dash for the trucks and piled in. During the ride back to Camp Rudder, you could feel the electricity. Rangers excitedly swapped stories about their experience in the swamp. Most of them laughed about trying to get their Zodiak moving in a straight line.

“I didn’t think we’d ever get to that damn island,” one ranger said. “It was like we were in some kind of fucking time warp. Paddling like hell but going

nowhere.”

“I thought we’d wear the damn oars out,” another said.

“I kept wondering what they’d do if none of us could get the damn things to the island.”

“Did you hear those machine guns?” a ranger in the support squad asked.

“Yeah, I didn’t think we were ever going to assault the objective,” I said.

“Our RI was standing in the middle of the guns with a spray bottle of Break Free oil. He was running gun to gun squirting that shit in the action and screaming, ‘Keep them fuckers singing, boys. Keep ‘em singing,’” he said, and we all laughed.

The trucks bucked to a stop in front of the barracks, and an RI shouted into the back. “Rangers, when you get inside, you can go ahead and take showers and get a few hours of rack. Then you’ve got weapons and gear to clean. Tonight, those who passed can go to the Gator Lounge,” he said and then paused just a second.

“Two beer limit, rangers,” he said, to a thunderous applause.

After a long hot shower, I lay on my bunk and quickly fell asleep. The RIs woke us around noon. We cleaned our weapons and gear for a couple of hours, and then an RI came for us. It was finally time to hear the verdict.

“Rangers, come with me,” he said, then led us out of the barracks and around back to an orderly room. “Wait out here, and we’ll call you in one at a time.”

Bravo and Charlie companies were also there waiting to be called into their orderly rooms. John was waiting with Bravo Company, so I went over to say hello.

“You been in yet?” I asked.

“No. You?”

“Nope. Do you think you passed?” I asked him.

“Yeah, I think so. How about you?”

“I think I did too, but I’m ready to know for sure,” I said.

“Yeah, when we were cleaning weapons Sergeant LaValley came by to check on me. He brought me a Tupperware container full of Mrs. LaValley’s triple-fudge brownies, which we affectionately refer to as Mississippi mud cakes. I tried to get him to give me the nod or not, but he was having none of it.”

Then I heard it.

“Blackmon,” the RI called out. My answer was coming. Even though I was fairly sure I’d earned the tab, my stomach was suddenly queasy.

“B’s to the front of the line. U’s to the back,” I told John and slapped him on the shoulder.

“Story of my life,” he said as I jogged to the orderly room.

The RI inside the orderly room was sitting at a desk. His patrol cap was kicked back on his head, and a pair of reading glasses hung on the tip of his nose. He looked at me over them and said, “Have a seat.”

Once I was seated, he looked down at a list. “How do you think you did?” he asked.

“Well, sergeant, I think I did okay.”

“Do you think you passed?” he asked.

“Yes, sergeant. I think so,” I said.

He placed his finger on the list by my name, then ran it down the line as if he’d not previously looked at it. “Hmm,” he said. “Ranger, you passed peer evals, and you passed your patrols. Congratulations. You’ll be graduating ranger school.” He then thrust his hand forward and shook mine.

A flood of emotions hit me. I was thrilled, relieved, and incredibly proud all at the same time. I’d made it through ranger school. When I walked outside, the vibe had changed. As soon as someone walked out of an orderly room, the others would try and read their body language and expression. If it looked like they were disappointed, they would gingerly ask how it went. If a student failed, the others would console the student. If a ranger came out smiling, then they’d shake hands and high-five. I joined my fellow rangers in Alpha Company but kept an eye out for John.

Eventually, I saw him go in, and when he came out, his squad ran over to congratulate him. I was about to walk over to him when a Bravo Company RI strode out of the orderly room, surveyed the rangers in the yard, and then yelled to the B Company rangers. “Hey, rangers!” he shouted. Everyone turned and gave him their undivided attention. He was a short sergeant first class, maybe five feet eight inches tall with a hawkish nose.

“While y’all are busy congratulating yourselves and telling each other how great you are, think about this. You think it’s over? This is just the beginning,”

he said, then paused and walked a few yards forward. “You have a new identity now. You’re no longer the same man that started this course. Now, you’re that ranger lieutenant, or that ranger sergeant, and when you do something good or bad, they’re going to say, ‘There’s that ranger sergeant or lieutenant or captain.’ So, it’s not over, rangers! It has just begun. For the rest of your life, that’s how people will see you. Let that sink in.”

He paused again and walked down the line, looking into the eyes of every ranger he passed. The intensity of his gaze was commanding. “And another thing,” he said. “I know you’re all excited about graduating, but I want you to think about those rangers that you will not see at the Gator Lounge tonight. The ones that aren’t graduating with you. You failed them!” And with that, he turned and went back inside the orderly room.

It was like being punched in the gut. Had we failed them? Could we have done more to help them pass their patrols? After all, they’d made it this far. The air had been sucked right out of us. Slowly, we began to disperse and return to the barracks.

As I walked back, I thought about what the RI had said. Had I really done my best to help those who had failed? I thought I had. At the end of the day, everyone has to meet the standard. And simply put, some did not. High-performing organizations have clear standards and people who consistently meet them. Yet, inevitably, there are people who fail to meet the standard, and they must be held accountable. I concluded that I’d done my part, and I could live with that.

That evening at the Gator Lounge I found John sitting with several other rangers in a booth. He was hugging that Tupperware container. “Ranger Blackmon,” he said as I sat down to join them. “Here. Have a homemade brownie,” he said, passing me the container. “Courtesy of Mrs. LaValley. Sergeant LaValley’s better half.”

Then he slapped Sergeant LaValley on the shoulder and laughed out loud. It seemed surreal to be at ranger school eating brownies—with an RI joining us—but this was no hallucination. It was over. We had finished the course, and I’m sure Sergeant LaValley was proud of his former soldier.

Seeing a subordinate (or former subordinate) succeed is one of the greatest

pleasures a leader can experience. Knowing you've had a role, however small, in driving that individual to great things is a feeling like no other. It's pride, sure, but it's more than that. Seeing his former soldier successfully earn the ranger tab had a visible effect on Sergeant LaValley. It was a beautiful sight to behold; I was truly happy for them.

Plus, those Mississippi mud cakes were more amazing than I could ever tell you.

Graduation

January 22, 1993. Fort Benning, Georgia

We sat on the ground just inside the wood line, careful to keep out of sight of the crowd gathered around a set of bleachers on Malvesti Field. Proud parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, and various other loved ones had made the trip to Fort Benning to see their newly minted army ranger receive his tab. It felt somewhat strange to think that within the hour, we'd be going back into society. Almost like our freedom was being returned.

I looked down at my hands. My knuckles were prominent on skinny fingers. Paper-thin skin covered veins, tendons, and bone. I had never seen a medical opinion on the subject, but rumor had it that it takes the body a year to fully recover from ranger school. I could easily see how that could be true.

"I should have been the honor graduate," Decker said. Decker was a Marine Force Recon guy. He was tall and lean with sandy brown hair. He'd been in my squad during Florida phase and had passed all seven of his patrols in ranger school. "They just wanted to give it to an officer," he said, then paused. "And they sure as hell would not give it to a marine."

"Jay went 7–0 on patrols too," I said. "What's more amazing is that he had never been on a patrol in his life until ranger school."

"Like I said, he's an officer," Decker retorted.

Jay was an army aviator, an AH-1 Cobra pilot, and he was the most unlikely person in our class, in many respects, to be named honor graduate. Yet, as I reflect back, I suppose he was perhaps the most likely. Jay was a Princeton graduate who had never patrolled until we began training for ranger school just two months prior to the course beginning. Jay was anything but the bespectacled, bookish Ivy League stereotype. He had dark curly hair, brown eyes, and a very positive attitude. He was a complete team player who did exactly what the RIs asked of him, followed the ranger handbook, and always helped his fellow

rangers when they were in leadership positions. Where many students were hardheaded and thought they knew it all, Jay listened. He was coachable. He was perfect on his patrols—passed every single one—and was justifiably selected as our distinguished honor graduate.

"I ain't ever saluting an officer that ain't got a tab," Bentley piped in. He was a private first class from 3rd Ranger Battalion who was also in my squad in Florida.

"Good luck with that, Bentley," I said.

"They don't deserve to be saluted if they ain't got a ranger tab," he said.

"Well, the army doesn't see it that way, Bentley. And, oh, by the way, there are more officers without tabs than with them in the army."

"Fuck 'em," he said.

"What is it with you guys and officers?" I asked. "We're on the same team, you know."

"Shit like this," Decker said. "That guy is not even infantry. He's a pilot and an officer. And they make him honor grad."

"That's crap, and you know it," I said. "Both of you passed all seven patrols, but I bet if you looked at his peer evals and major plus spot reports, he did better. Your attitude, that's your problem."

"Whatever."

Thankfully, our argument was interrupted before it got out of hand.

A deep voice boomed from the PA system on the field. "Ladies and gentlemen, please find your seats. The graduation ceremony will begin in five minutes."

For sixty-eight days we'd worked together to earn our tabs. We never thought about rank or position, yet here we were, ten minutes from graduation and immersing ourselves back into the army, and we were fighting with one another.

Psst pop, psst pop.

RIs threw smoke grenades in front of the bleachers where the crowd was now being seated. This was going to be memorable for the crowd. Ranger school class 2-93 emerging from a smoke screen. *That's movie material*, I thought.

"Okay, rangers, let's go. Form up! Hustle up. Let's go!" an RI said.

We hurried out of the woods and assembled ourselves in formation. A thick

blanket of smoke now obscured the field between us and the bleachers.

“Forward, march!” our company first sergeant shouted, and we marched forward into the smoke. I got goosebumps almost instantly. I knew my wife was there somewhere watching, and I only hoped that she could somewhat understand what it meant to me to be a ranger.

We emerged out of the smoke and into view of the crowd. Each of us walked a little taller, our chests and heads held high. It was a dramatic moment. As we passed through the cloud of smoke, the crowd came into view, and when they saw us, they stood and began applauding.

“Mark time march!” and we began marching in place.

“Company, halt!” and we stopped.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the ranger school graduation ceremony for ranger school class two dash ninety-three,” the MC announced.

The colors were presented and the national anthem played. The ranger training brigade chaplain gave the benediction, and the guest speaker was introduced. He made a few quick remarks about what it took to become a ranger, told the families that they should be proud, and then asked those who had been invited to pin tabs on their soldiers to move forward. Instantly, the bleachers emptied as family members rushed onto the field to join their ranger.

Soon our ranks were filled with excited family and friends. Lisa found me just as Lieutenant Colonel Mark Wentlent, my former battalion commander at Fort Rucker, was about to pin a black-and-gold ranger tab to my left shoulder. He’d flown up from Fort Rucker to pin tabs on all of the aviators who were graduating that day. Six of us began the course together, but a couple had been recycled along the way. Four of us stood in the ranks of class 2-93.

I beamed with pride as I looked down at the black-and-gold tab on my shoulder. Lieutenant Colonel Wentlent shook my hand, congratulated me, and gave me his challenge coin. Then he moved along to pin on the next aviator’s tab. Lisa gave me a big hug and a kiss. I’d spent Christmas with her only three weeks prior, but the days had seemed so long that Christmas already felt like a lifetime ago.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we ask that you move back to the bleachers area so we can dismiss the class,” the MC announced, moving things along. I was quite

surprised at how efficient the graduation ceremony was. Commonly, military ceremonies are long and drawn out, but not this one.

Slowly, everyone made their way back to the bleachers, but very few sat this time. Most remained standing as they awaited our release.

The first sergeant moved to the front of our formation. Just as the last family member exited our ranks, he commanded. “Class, attention!” and we snapped to attention. “Parade rest,” and we crossed our hands behind our lower backs and spread our feet shoulder-width apart.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the MC announced. “Please rise for the playing of the army song.”

“Class, attention!”

As we assumed the position of attention, the army song rang out over the PA system. At the conclusion of the song, the MC announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the commander and command sergeant major of the Ranger Training Brigade, this concludes today’s ceremony. Thank you for attending.”

And with that the first sergeant commanded, “Dismissed!” and it was over.

From Fort Benning, Georgia to the deserts of New Mexico, and from the mountains of the Chattahoochee National Forest to the swamps of Florida, pain, hunger, fatigue, and freezing temperatures had been our constant companion. It felt surreal, unnatural, to just walk away, yet that’s exactly what we did.

As Lisa and I walked to the car, I saw John with several other rangers across the parking lot. They were laughing, no doubt recounting a story. I wanted to go introduce Lisa to John. Over Christmas break, I’d told her all about him and that we’d be serving with the Uharriets at Fort Bliss. I decided to wait until we had settled there. We’d already agreed to a steak dinner in El Paso with our families anyway.

When we got to the car, I removed my BDU blouse and put on one that Lisa had brought for me. It had a ranger tab already sewn above my unit patch. From the car, I could see the black-and-gold sign that read, “Ranger—Not for The Weak or Fainthearted.” That sign had new meaning for me now—significance. Only those who have experienced ranger school can truly appreciate the depth of that statement. I looked down at the tab on my shoulder and ran my finger over

it.

“Let’s get something to eat before we head home,” I said.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Let’s go to the food court at the post exchange,” I said. “There are a lot of choices there.”

The truth is that I knew there would be a lot of soldiers at the food court, and I wanted to be seen with a ranger tab on my shoulder. I would never forget what I did to earn that tab, but I, like so many others, wanted people to know. Newly-tabbed rangers drove straight to Ranger Joe’s and bought stickers for their cars, black-and-gold sweatshirts and tee shirts with ranger tabs on them. That small patch said volumes about us—what kind of men we were. We were incredibly proud to be rangers.

As I stated in the preface, reflecting back across thirty years of army service, one of the things of which I am most proud is having earned a ranger tab. But it isn’t the patch, rather the process, that made all the difference. It was what I learned about myself that truly mattered.

The man who walked in my boots on November 2, 1992 was no more. I was different now. In the sixty-eight days I spent in ranger school, I learned that good things don’t come easy. Some things take time, energy, and practice, often frustration and even anger, and always, always tremendous effort. Learning to play an instrument, for example, requires years of practice, but the result is music. So it is with ranger school. What we learned could not be taught academically. No classroom on earth could replicate the leadership laboratory called ranger school. To learn what we did about ourselves required that we be subjected to extreme conditions.

I learned that earning the tab requires a tremendous amount of mental and physical suffering, but through the suffering, I discovered many things about myself, about my character. I learned that the greatest struggles we face in life are most often within us—the choices we have to make. When each of us thought we might die of hypothermia in the desert, some men sacrificed a portion of their comfort to share the warmth of the fire with their fellow rangers. Others would not yield the flame. In Florida, a hungry man fed his own selfish desires by stealing food from another starving ranger. Each of us waged our own

personal war against selfishness. The urge to look out for one's own self-interests at the expense of others was powerful, but in the end, who would follow a leader who doesn't put the needs of his soldiers first?

Selfless service is one of the seven army values. We'd all received many hours of classroom instruction on the concept, but ranger school provided a depth of understanding that we could not have gotten anywhere else.

We also grappled with the urge to quit. The inner struggle was real, and it intensified day after day. Men could be heard mumbling to themselves, literally trying to convince themselves not to yield to the misery and pain. Like the ranger who quit without saying so in mountain phase, many fell prey to self-pity, which slowly eroded their desire to see it through to the end. It poisoned them by degrees until they could no longer force themselves to continue. So they quit.

The closest I came to losing the battle and quitting was not as I froze in the desert or while I endured the chronic fatigue of mountains. It was the day Staff Sergeant Justice hung us from the rafters in the suspended harness. Still, to this day, I believe he enjoyed torturing us, but he also truly wanted to find out who was willing to endure whatever it took to be there.

Now, looking back, I cringe at the thought of what it might have felt like to quit. To live with those words, *I quit*, for the rest of my life. Still today, I don't even like to think about it.

Yet through it all, I learned that I have the mental and physical strength to do extremely hard things. There were times when every fiber of my body screamed out for me to quit. My back hurt. My feet hurt. I was cold and wet. Yet somehow, I persuaded myself to keep putting one foot in front of the other. And with each step, I gained more momentum, more confidence. I learned to control the things that I could control, focus on the end game, and celebrate simple comforts, like the warmth of a sunrise and the beauty of a starlit desert night.

Perhaps most importantly, I learned that before you can lead others, you must first learn to lead yourself.

Rangers Lead the Way!

Acknowledgments

I would be remiss if I did not begin by thanking my dear friend and personal editor Stuart Jones. Every good leader needs that person close to them that will tell the king when he is naked, as we often say in the military. Stu is that guy for me. His unvarnished honesty has made me a better writer. This is our third book working together, and I could not imagine beginning another project without his commitment to saddle up and ride along. Thank you, Stu!

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I'd also like to thank Perry "Doc" Black, who spent several hours on the phone reliving ranger school with me. Perry spent the majority of his career in the 75th Ranger Regiment and Joint Special Operations Command, where he became a legend in the medical community. He is now a minister in Kentucky.

I was both humbled and a bit awestruck to spend time interviewing First Sergeant Michael J. Ramsey. In 2017, Mike was inducted into the Ranger Hall of Fame for his immeasurable contributions to the US Army Rangers. A combat veteran, Mike's contributions to the ranger community are unparalleled. He was an integral part of forming the Ranger Regiment and the transition of the Ranger Department to the Ranger Training Brigade. As the principal instructor, Mike oversaw the establishment of the desert phase of training, which was initially held at Dugway Proving Grounds, Utah.

First Sergeant Ramsey retired from the army in 1994 and transitioned to a career in law enforcement, which spanned another twenty-plus years. As you might have expected, Mike moved back to the mountains of Northern Georgia, where he served as chief deputy of the Lumpkin County Sherriff's Office.

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